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WHEN THIS MARTIAN CRASHED THE IRON CURTAIN . . .

HE FELL AMONG THIEVES

By

MILTON LESSER

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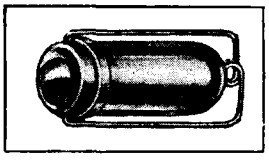

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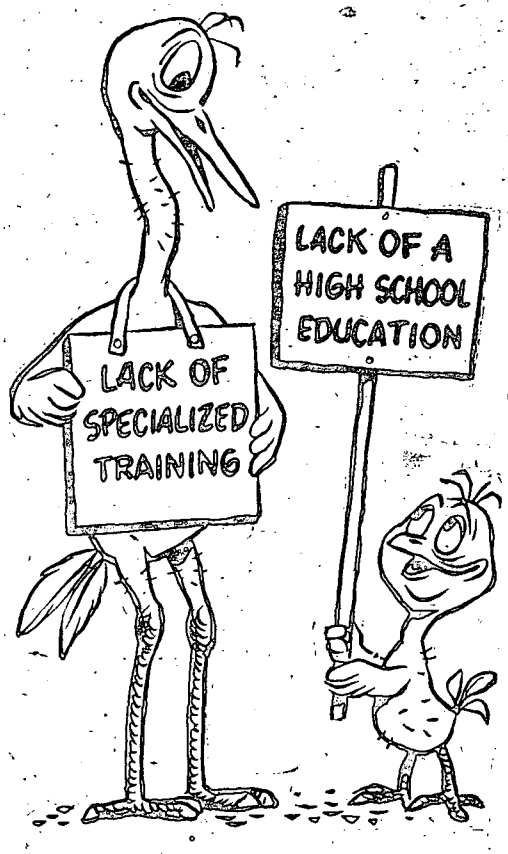

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MARCH, 1952

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All Features Complete

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VOLUME 14 NUMBER 3

All Stories Complete

HE FELL AMONG THIEVES (Novel—25,000) ..... by Milton Lesser 10

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay

The little green Martian meant well. But the road from Mars to Moscow—like the road from Mars to mayhem—is paved with the best of intentions

BROTHERS BEYOND THE VOID (Short—3,200) ..... by Paul W. Fairman 56

Illustrated by Leo Ramon Summers

To Marcusson, the thought that people are the same everywhere was comforting. Until he learned that this sameness was the very thing he was fighting against

THE TRAVELLING BRAIN (Short—8,500) ..... by William P. McGivern 64

Illustrated by Paul Lundy

Mincing was a dead man—without the rigor mortis. Until one day the old professor showed him that it was only in death that a man could really begin to enjoy living

YOUR SOUL COMES C. O. D. (Short-short—1,400) ..... by Mack Reynolds 80

Illustrated by Leo Ramon Summers

When you make a pact, sometimes it's better not to know who the other party is. Norman didn't when he made his contract—and he certainly got more than he bargained for...

THE MASTER KEY (Novelette) ..... by Frances M. Deegan 86

Illustrated by Frank Navarro

All that stood between Dan Storm and a million dollars' worth of hairweed was an entire planet of red Venusian gangsters—and one beautiful Earth girl

Front cover painting by Leo Ramon Summers and Ed. Valigursky, illustrating a scene from "He Fell Among Thieves"

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

THE OTHER evening we were entertained by a most enchanting fantasy—"Miracle in Milan". This film is unique in that it is one of the very few *great* fantasies ever shown on the screen. Reminiscent of the old comic gems produced by Charles Chaplin and Rene Clair, "Miracle in Milan" was directed by Italy's brilliant Vittorio De Sica, famous for his award-winning films "Bicycle Thief" and "Shoe Shine".

This masterpiece of comic fantasy tells the simple story of Toto the Good, a foundling who was found under a cabbage patch by the town character. She dies when he's still a young boy, and he grows up in an orphan home. When he leaves the orphan home, he becomes the leader of a group of colorful tramps in a hobo jungle outside Milan.

When this dump land suddenly begins to spurt oil, the rich owner tries to force the tramps off his property. The high point of the comedy is when Toto's dead foster mother comes down from Heaven to help her son with some Heavenly aid. She's closely pursued, however, by two angels who are determined to shoo her back where she belongs. But Toto manages to receive from her devoted arms a dove, which works the miracles for which everyone has longed.

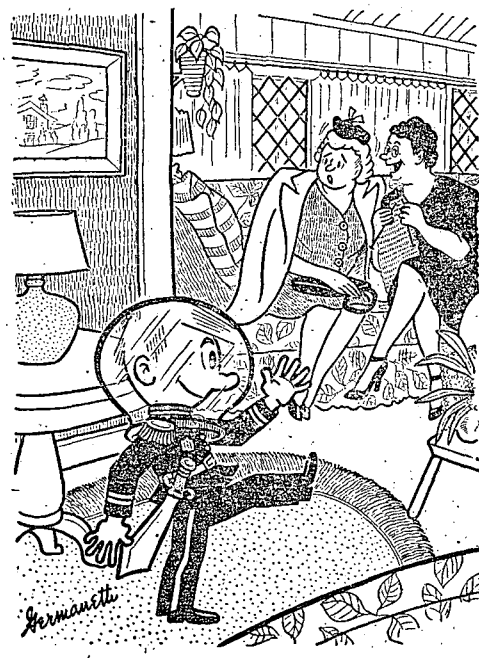
Already the winner of several awards: the New York Critics' Award For The Best Foreign Movie of 1951, and the recipient of two of the top European film awards, "Miracle in Milan" is a delightful combination of the fantastic and the comic—with a good chunk of political satire thrown in.

Though the dialogue is in Italian, the action is so self-evident that the English subtitles are almost superfluous. And the sound tract is as much a part of the story mood as the dialogue, which is a refreshing innovation.

This is one movie we highly recommend to all lovers of fine films—and fantasy. Don't miss it!

One of the best shorts we've come across in a long time is Mack Reynolds' "Your Soul Comes C.O.D." (page 80, this issue). The twist ending on this one surprised even your blase editors—and that—if you'll pardon us—is going some.

Next month, in addition to a top lineup of exciting stories by your favorite authors, we are making an announcement that will thrill each and every one of you who read FANTASTIC ADVENTURES and its sister magazine AMAZING STORIES. Can you guess? ..... LES



Since Junior's been watching "Captain Video", we can't keep goldfish in the house

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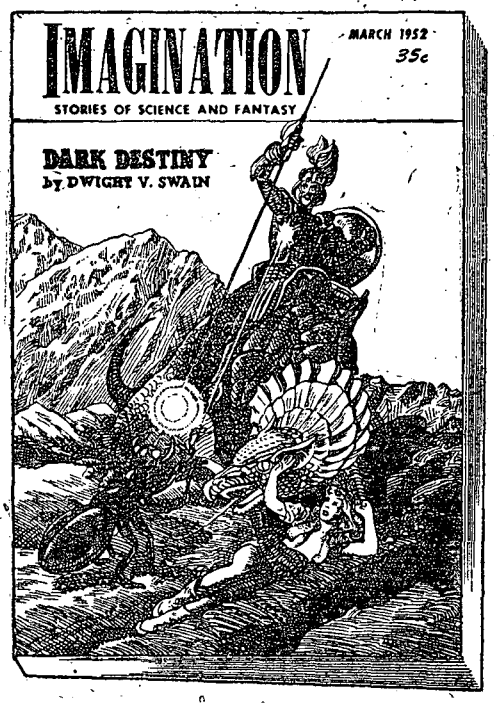

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I AGED ten years in that minute.

The realization that the ship wasn't there came over me slowly, it seemed. One minute it was there and the next it wasn't, but it seemed as though a long time elapsed between the two perceptions. Around me the last hunks of asteroidal rock rode in their calm perpetual orbits.

It's hard to capture that feeling in words. One minute you're part of a mining exploration party, working an asteroidal clump. You've been out an hour. The next minute you're a single human being isolated amid the bleak vastness of empty space, accompanied only by a cluster of rock.

I could feel the sweat burst out on my forehead and my armpits were icy. For a minute panic swept over me and I screamed madly into the mike, but only the hissing of background noise responded in the earphones. "All right, you fool," I told myself aloud, "relax—you're in a bad situation, but they'll miss you in a short while and then they'll come back." That sounded sensible and I wanted to believe it, but I knew I couldn't. I was a human being, and alone in the Asteroid Belt. My ship—right now—was blasting away.

By sheer will I forced myself to think. What could I do? A relieved, almost hysterical laugh came from my lips. I unhitched the emergency pulser from the back of my suit and clutched it to me as though I would never let it go—and I wouldn't. This was my one possible link with living. If it didn't work I could imagine myself dying. For another six hours there'd be enough air. Oh, I wouldn't have to worry. But then the carbon dioxide would start to thicken and my breath would come faster and I'd breathe hard and heavily and no air would come and I'd choke and scream—and then I'd quiet down and my oxygen-starved brain would finally find peace. I shuddered and shook my head.

I almost hated to push the button on the pulser. Once I set it working it would send out high-energy, high-frequency pulses which could be picked up by a radar scanner for almost a million miles. More with a more sensitive receiver. It would do that for ten minutes and then the batteries would slowly die and there'd be silence and that would be the cutting of my final link.

But every moment that passed meant that the ship was getting farther away. I pushed the button. I slid my tuner to the edge of the pulse's frequency and caught it—it was working! Now all I could do was wait and hope that the radar watch wouldn't miss the tiny *blip* my pulser would be creating on the screen. All I had to do was wait....

A pulser isn't like a bonfire—in appearance at least. You can't see anything happen—all you know is that the invisible radio waves are going out. You can't warm yourself at them and you don't have the leaping flames, not in outer space you don't. But your mind converts the pulser into a mental bonfire and you warm yourself at the imaginary waves. I stared around me and watched until my eyes ached for the faintest flicker of a reddish flame, and after a while the strain was so great that I just shut my eyes and hoped....

They picked me up twenty minutes later. When I got aboard I passed out, and for days I wouldn't look out a port into that infinite vastness. The doctor says he doubts if I'll ever get into a spacesuit again, but I don't believe him. I know I will—someday....

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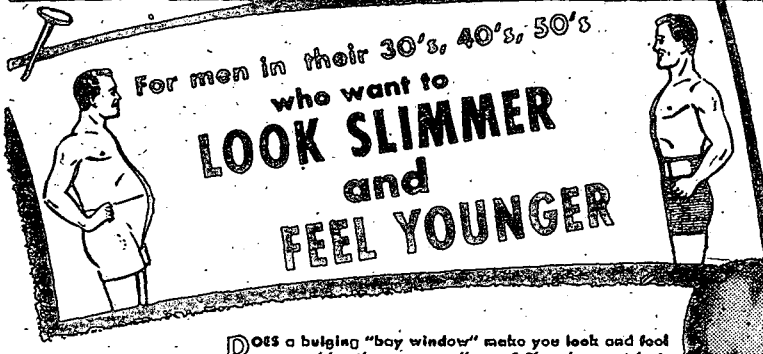

For men in their 30's, 40's, 50's who want to

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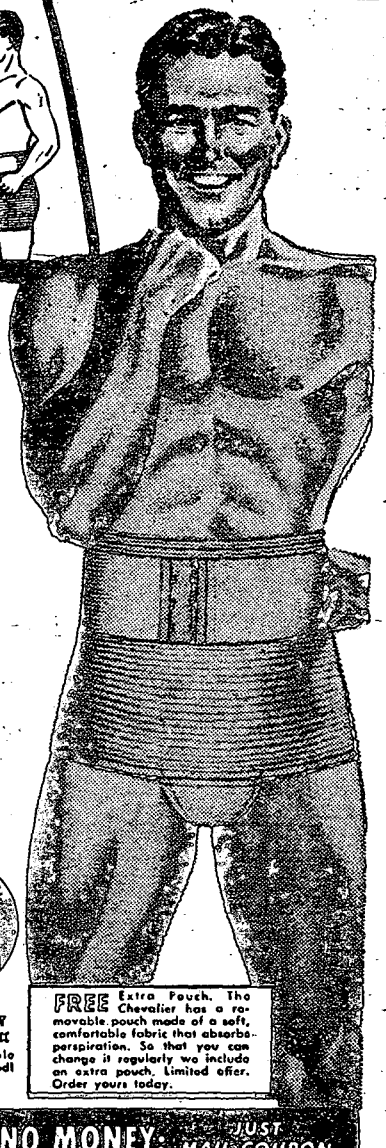

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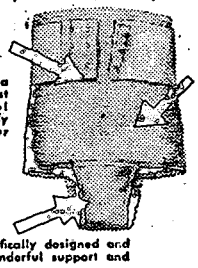

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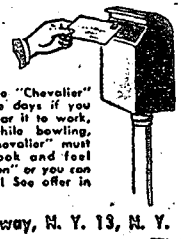

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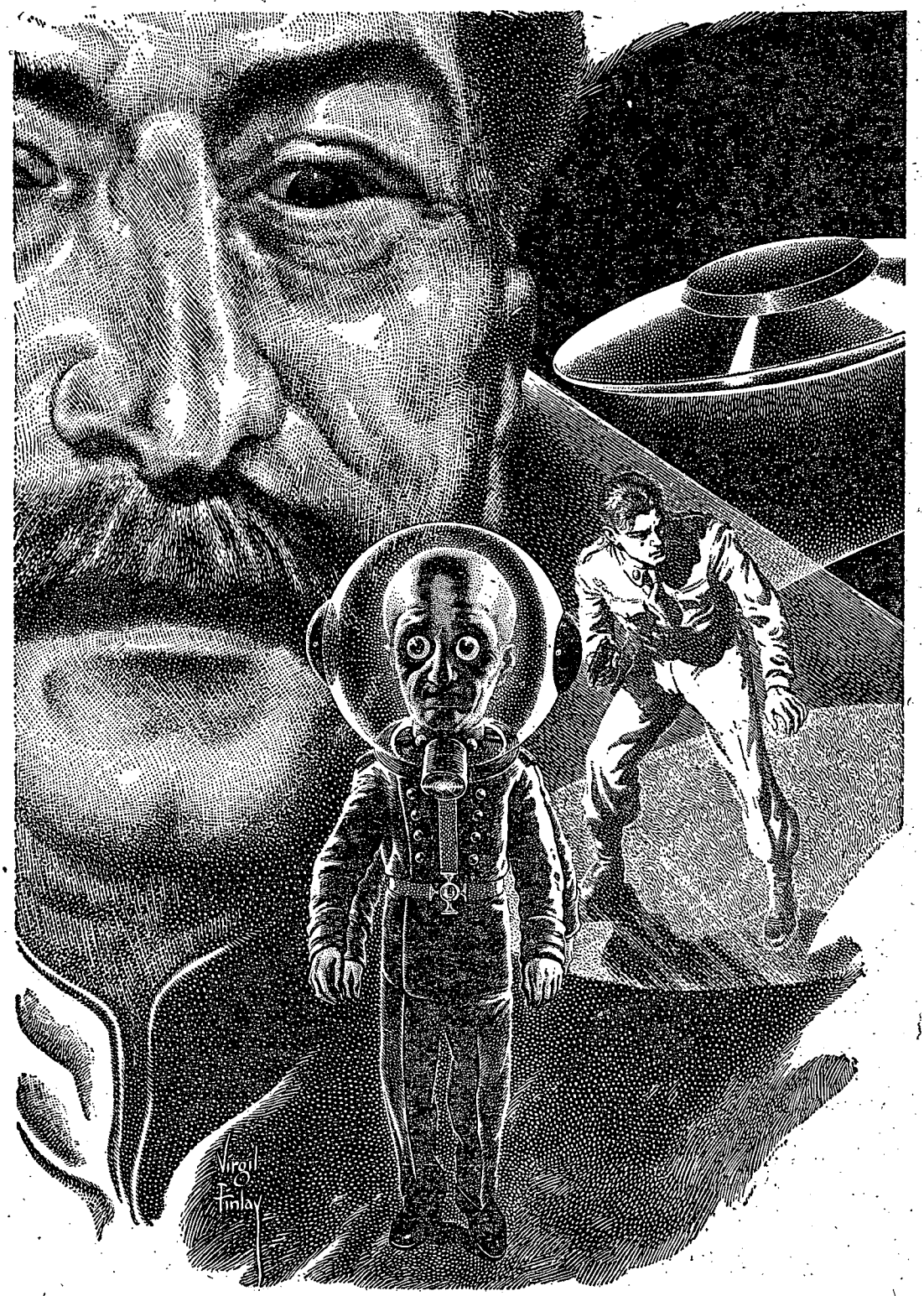

The little green man was bewildered. This was a world he couldn't comprehend

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HE FELL AMONG THIEVES

By Milton Lesser

It was a bad break. America's worst enemy became partners with a powerful planet. But Pearl Harbor was a catastrophe too, and remember what we did about that . . . .

NICK SKINNER buried his parachute just outside the city of Pinsk, which lies well within the Pripet Marshes, deep in Russian-occupied Poland and not a hundred miles from the Soviet border.

His mouth was very dry and his palms clammy, and for a moment he listened as the plane droned away overhead. From the direction of Pinsk, a big anti aircraft searchlight stabbed up half-heartedly through the dense fog. When the drone of the engine faded away, so did the light.

And Skinner was alone.

The Pripet Marshes sprawl like a rotting carcass over the Russo-Polish frontier, dank and noisome, alive with the eerie night sounds of swampland. Soviet country...

Half a thousand miles to the West was the other side of the Iron Curtain, and safety. But Skinner knew it might be a long time before he could high-

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tail it in that direction. Maybe never...

Me, Nick Skinner, he thought. Captain in the C.I.A. And because my mother was once a dark-eyed Russian beauty, because we had spoken the language of the Tsars as much as English in my Weehauken childhood, I was the man for the job.

Bedding down as well as he might in the inky night of the Pripet, Skinner found it hard to believe that the glistening halls of the Pentagon lay only forty-eight hours behind him. But that's the way you had to work in the Central Intelligence Agency. Quickly, so quickly that there isn't time for anything to leak out.

Skinner could remember the grave, serious faces as they ushered him into the office of the five-star general. A tall man with a lined, work-weary face, the general had come right to the point. "Skinner," he said, "what do you know about Russia?"

Skinner could remember the grave, general put him at his ease. He shrugged. "Not a great deal, sir. I speak the language like a native. My mother came over right after their revolution in 1918. But I've never been closer to Soviet territory than a goodwill tour in Czechoslovakia. They took some of us on that right after the war, before they started to get unpleasant."

The general laughed softly. "All right. You speak the language well, and that's important. What part of Russia did your mother come from?"

"Tula, I think. Large town a couple of hundred miles south of Moscow. I'm almost sure it was Tula, General. My mother's dead now."

"Tula it is then. That'll be your home town, Skinner."

"What?"

"Simple. Your identification papers will show you're a native of Tula, one Nikolay Mironov. Occupation: transient worker. You see, Skinner, you're going to Russia. You leave right after we're finished here, as soon as they can give you the proper clothing."

Skinner said he thought the general was joking.

BUT THE older man shook his head, making a bridge of his hands, interlacing the fingers and peering over them at Skinner. "Hardly. Skinner, do you know anything about Russia's ability to produce atomic weapons?"

"No, sir. Just what I read, that's all. We know they set off at least one atomic bomb about two or three years ago. We know they're hunting up uranium ores furiously—"

"They're not! Up until a few months ago your account would have been perfectly correct. But doesn't it strike you as odd that they contented themselves with merely that one explosion? Further, our underground contacts report a startling thing. The hubbub over uranium ores had died down completely inside the Iron Curtain. They extracted most of their uraninite in the Erz Mountains, where two rich veins meet at a town in Czechoslovakia called Joachimsthal. The town is now deserted, Skinner! For some reason, or reasons, the Reds have apparently lost all interest in the manufacture of atomic weapons.

"You're going to Russia to find out why. We've got to know, Skinner. You figure it out: maybe, just maybe, the balance of power is still in our favor because of superiority on atomic weapons. And that's holding the war-hungry Soviets on a mighty slim leash. Now they scoff at atomics...."

Skinner stood up. "Does Intelligence draw any conclusions?"

"Of course. The only conclusion we can draw. The Reds have something else, Skinner. They must have. Some

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secret weapon so utterly powerful they can forget all about their work with atomics. Frankly, Skinner, we're afraid. And we're sending you to find out what it's all about. That is, if you'll go...."

Skinner's heart pounded furiously under his ribs, and his fingers trembled slightly when they took the drink the general offered. He even forgot to be surprised that liquor was present at these secret meetings, and he didn't answer until he'd taken three stiff shots of bourbon. "Hell," he said. "You don't have to ask me. I'm in the C.I.A. and that's that. You think I ought to go, and I'll go. Don't get me wrong, General. I'm no hero. But I didn't enter this service to twiddle my thumbs. You got a job you think I can handle. I'll go."

After that, the General was apologetic. "There's no plan, Skinner. Nothing. We don't know enough of what's going on to formulate one. You'll be on your own, completely on your own. You've got to find that weapon—whatever it is that's made the Russians throw their atomic preparations out the window. Then you've got to get that information back here. I'll be frank, Skinner: I know a few people who'll be surprised if you're able to get back—with it."

And that was that. Skinner could have no farewells, because you never knew when you'd say goodbye to the wrong person. He was clothed in a coarse wool shirt and a pair of denims. They gave him a .45 and enough ammunition to choke an elephant. They gave him identification papers, in Russian. Ration papers, travel papers, a transient's visa, all in Russian. He wasn't Nick Skinner any longer, he was Nikolay Mironov of Tula.

They didn't waste any time. Before he knew it he was on a plane winging over the Atlantic, and a dozen hours later he stepped out in Occupied Germany. A lot of back-slapping there, and wishes of good luck; a good night's sleep and a day at the Officer's Club in Bonn.

He knew he'd not be dropped in Russia itself, because there was no organized underground movement there to get him started. Outside of Pinsk, instead, in Eastern Poland. After that—well, he might have to plod all the way across the Eurasian land mass and back again, on foot if necessary. And at the outset he didn't have the slightest idea where to go. No one did....

NOW, IN the Pripet, he waited for dawn. It came slowly, with great masses of fog billowing in with the wind from Russia. A Polish refugee in Bonn had warned him to stay put until the fog lifted from the surface of the swamp because the bogs and quagmires could be deadly.

By the time the sun began to make inroads in the smoking white haze, he was hungry—and drenched. He set out along a muddy road which skirted stinking pools of muck that almost smacked of the tropics. The shoulder-holster of his .45 and the two cartridge belts chafed his skin under the denim shirt, but there was something comforting about their presence as he loosened each of the buckles a notch.

He found the two-lane highway which led to Pinsk, turned East upon it. The way led to Pinsk—and to Russia.

An occasional car bumped past noisily, but horse-drawn wagons were more common, driven by old peasants in their simple rustic garb. Once a small motorized column of red troops sped by on motorcycles and old lend-lease jeeps, and Skinner watched the

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peasants pull their wagons off the road and into the swamps. One old fellow with a tired gray face couldn't get his wagon out of the mud, and Skinner helped him.

He muttered his thanks in Polish—at least Skinner guessed it was thanks, because the seamy old face smiled at him. But the peasant grumbled and muttered to himself when he received an answer in Russian. If this simple farmer were typical, the Poles lost no love on their Russian masters.

"Pinsk?" Skinner demanded.

When the peasant nodded sourly, Skinner climbed into the wagon beside him, and with much clearing of his throat and swearing, the old man drove his horses forward. The two scrawny beasts made almost as much noise as he did.

There were a lot of Red Army men in Pinsk, wearing their bright gray uniforms. The town was a dirty, isolated place, seemingly serving no other purpose than to attract all the horseflies and mosquitos in the area.

IN BONN they'd told Skinner to seek out the Red Star Inn which, before the "Liberation", had been called the Inn of Pripet. It turned out to be a weather-beaten old building that looked like a barn. Inside, the big room was musty, gloomy, foul-smelling. Off to the left, half a dozen Red soldiers laughed and joked at the bar, and one of them would make lewd gestures at the Polish barmaid every time she came past. She hardly seemed to notice him.

A man with a big, unkempt moustache that would have been Stalinesque had it not been iron-gray, was cleaning glasses at the other end of the bar. The girl's father, Skinner guessed.

"Vodka," he said, waiting while the old man poured the drink. Skinner had a money belt and a billfold, both given to him in Bonn, and both cram-full of Russian currency. The native vodka, Skinner realized after one choking swallow, bore the same relationship to the smoother United States product as corn-liquor bears to bonded bourbon, and sometimes the stuff ran as high as a hundred-fifty proof, or seventy-five per cent alcohol. The Red Army boys were getting a refill from the barmaid, and it didn't look like their first. All of them seemed pretty gay.

"Why do you Pinsk people live out here in the middle of the swamps?" Skinner asked the barman. That question would serve as identification; if he were a member of the Polish underground, the old man would know the right answer.

But he merely growled from behind his moustache: "The government was supposed to drain these marshes, my friend. You know that. But then came the war."

Skinner shrugged, ambling slowly down the length of the bar until he was in such a position that he'd get his next drink from the girl.

"Hey, Pole!" shouted one of the Red Army boys, a blond lad too young to have seen action in World War II. He was grinning in expectation of some joke about to be perpetrated.

Skinner wiped his lips, tried to make his voice steady. Here was his first contact with the Reds themselves. "I'm no Pole," he said quietly, in Russian. The soldier seemed very disappointed.

"Oh, Comrade. Well, then will you have some vodka with us?"

One of the others demanded: "Why aren't you in uniform?"

"I served my time," Skinner said. "Ninth Field Army and guerilla work near Smolensk. I'm in the reserve now."

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"That's a coincidence," the blond lad told Skinner, slapping him on the back. "We're from the Ninth. What do you think of General Roskinov's new policy?"

Who the hell was General Roskinov?

SKINNER mumbled something about being out of the service for three years, and then he called loudly to the girl for more Vodka. "It's on me, Comrades," he assured the Red Army boys, and they were very pleased. All ordered double vodkas as Skinner asked the girl, a buxom thing in peasant garb, the same question he'd asked her father.

She didn't bat an eyelash. She said, "After you live in the Pripet for a time, you get to like it. The life is so quiet." And that, precisely, was the answer Skinner sought.

He smiled at her, casually. "Are you doing anything tonight, Miss... uh..."

"Natasha." She smiled, making eyes at Skinner in such a way that all the Red Army boys turned to watch. "No, I'm not doing anything."

"Well, would you like to spend the evening with an ex-officer of the Red Army—?"

"Officer, eh?" the blond Red demanded, respect in his voice.

Skinner shrugged. "Just a lieutenant. But, Comrades, you're interfering with an operation of love."

They laughed at that, and one of them muttered the Russian equivalent of the idiom about their not being able to get to first base with the girl. Skinner told them it was superior technique, and they laughed again.

Natasha said, "Yes, I'd like that. Did you say seven?"

"I didn't say. But seven is fine, Natasha. You can call me Nikolay—and I'll see you then."

"Yes, Nikolay," she agreed demurely, and blushed.

"Yes, Nikolay," one of the Reds mimicked her speech. "I don't know how you do it, Comrade Nikolay."

Skinner had a few more drinks with the Reds—their treat this time—and then his head began to swim. He'd eaten nothing for close to twelve hours, and now he ordered some sausage and black bread, the middle-European equivalent of a hamburger.

After that he excused himself and went to one of Pinsk's three barber shops, which was a bathhouse as well. While he was shaved, he heard water splashing in the ancient metal tubs in a rear room. Like barbers anyplace else—from Ancient Greece to the present—Skinner's man deluged him with a constant flow of chatter, half in Polish which he did not understand, half in a very badly spoken Russian.

Shave concluded, the barber began to finger the buttons of Skinner's shirt. "You'll want a bath, of course."

Skinner shoved his hands away. "Of course *not*."

"But, sir, everyone who shaves here also bathes here, and for so little extra money. Come—"

SKINNER had to push the dirty hands away again. A bath would feel mighty good to his cramped muscles, but he could just see himself stripping off the shirt and exposing his .45 and cartridge belts. He'd be in the hands of the Secret Police before he had time to put his shirt on again.

"No, thanks," he said, this time more firmly. He paid the man, who was talking to himself as he made his way back to the bath room, doubtless to check upon the amount of soap his bathers were using.

Skinner wandered around town idly, chafing at the delay. The robust good health of Natasha's red cheeks and

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buxom figure was an exception. Most of the people of Pinsk were thin and undernourished here in this dirty little city which was the focal point of Russo-Polish trade across the Pripet Marshes. The trade was one-way, of course—all to the advantage of the overlords, and you could see that in the people's faces.

By six o'clock a change came over the town; and Skinner was nervous because he couldn't put his finger on the reason for it. The streets became almost deserted, and that didn't seem right, not now, just at the close of the working day. Those people he did encounter were fearful, suspicious, alert—and more than once he saw some of them detained and questioned by gray-uniformed Red Army men.

One of the soldiers laid a big hand on his shoulder, and Skinner felt the fingers scant inches from his holster-strap. It was the blond boy from the Red Star Inn.

"Comrade Nikolay," he said, not friendly now, "just what is it you're doing in Pinsk? What brings you here?"

Skinner smiled. "Why?"

"Answer the questions, please." He was alarmed about something, but at the same time he was a cocky, arrogant new member of the army which, not too many years before, had shattered the German *Wehrmacht*. He could be dangerous.

Skinner said he was a transient worker out of Tula.

"Is that so? What brings you to Poland?"

Skinner mumbled something about a vacation, and the soldier snickered. Probably it was a mistake. As if anyone would want to take a vacation in this poor conquered land.

"Your papers, please."

Skinner removed the identification card and travel visa from his billfold, showed them to the soldier, who was very surprised. But the travel visa proclaimed that one Nickolay Mironov, of Tula, could travel with impunity any place in Russia or Poland. That was an unusual thing in a land where a man sometimes had to wait months to receive permission to leave his home town.

Skinner winked. "Comrade, I told you I was an ex-officer."

"Secret mission, eh?"

Skinner winked again. "Something like that. I can't talk—"

"Well, then let me see your discharge papers, Comrade Nikolay."

Damn! Skinner had invented that story about the Ninth Field Army on the spur of the moment, but in a country where service was both universal and drawn out, a man would not travel without his discharge certificate or a photostat of it.

Skinner wished he knew what the hell was going on, what had caused all the trouble. And the blond lad of the Red Army held his hand out, waiting for the papers Skinner didn't have.

There was a rumpus down the street. It looked like an old peasant, probably as innocent as Adam before Eve, couldn't answer all the questions thrown at him. The blond soldier ran to join his companions, calling over his shoulder that he'd see Skinner later. *Not if I can help it,* Skinner thought grimly.

CHAPTER II

NATASHA wore a simple, low-cut peasant dress which must have been around for a long time, because she couldn't quite hide the deft patchwork and stitching. "You're early," she said.

"I know. Does it matter?"

She shook her head. "No. I get off now anyway. You want to take a

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walk out on the marshes or something?"

"Well, I'd rather just sit and talk. Provided you have a place we can talk without being disturbed."

"I know of such a place, Nikolay. Come."

She took a bottle of vodka from the shelf, came around the bar and let Skinner hold her hand. They looked just like a couple about to embark on a date, and no one in the Red Star Inn paid them any attention, although the place was pretty crowded by now.

They walked together, not speaking, up a flight of sagging wooden stairs and thence across a dark hallway to a little room. The chamber contained a bed, quite large and quite thin of mattress, an old discolored dresser with a cracked mirror hanging from a peg over it, and a chair. Natasha slumped down on the bed after closing the door and bolting it, and Skinner crossed the room to the stiff-backed chair.

"Now," she said, "just who are you?"

Skinner shook his head firmly. "Nikolay Mironov will be good enough. That's who I am, Nikolay Mironov." He wouldn't tell every buxom peasant lass he met who he was, whether she knew the underground counter word or not.

She smiled. "All right, Nikolay. What do you want of me?"

"Well, I'd like you, or somebody, to take me through the swamps and into Russia."

"You speak Russian. Your name is Nikolay Mironov. You are a Russian. Why do I have to take you? Also, what business would it be of mine whether you get through the swamps and across the border?"

SKINNER got up, paced around the room. He placed his hands on Natasha's shoulders and dug the fingers in hard through the thin dress until she winced. "Who I am doesn't matter. But I have an important mission, and if you're what you claim to be, you'll take me."

"Have you any proof?"

"No, and that's the truth." It was. The only identification he had was counterfeit Russian.

Natasha grinned at him. "But for one thing, I think I would turn you over to the officials and forget all about you."

"What's that one thing?"

"What happened in town today. Don't tell me you don't know why Pinsk is so excited?"

Skinner told her he didn't.

"There was a farmer named Kurzowski hunting for snakes in the marshes. The government pays a bounty, you know. You don't? Well, never mind. Anyway, Kurzowski found something."

"What?"

"Kurzowski found a parachute, purely by accident. It was not Russian-made, Nikolay, and the soldiers say it has not been in the swamps outside of Pinsk for more than a few hours, a day at most. There is someone here in Pinsk who does not belong." She pushed his hands away from her shoulders. "But one thing I'll have to admit, 'Nikolay'; you speak perfect Russian."

"So do you," he reminded her. "And you're Polish. Now will you take me?"

"I suppose—" Natasha's words were cut off in mid-sentence. Someone pounded on the door.

"Open up!" a voice called loudly, and it sounded like the blond Red Army youth. "I'm looking for the Russian from Tula who calls himself Nikolay Mironov."

"He's not here," Natasha said sleepily.

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"I told you to open. I would like to see that for myself."

Natasha groaned wearily, got up and went to the door. She hissed over her shoulder, "Get into bed, quick! Under the covers." Then, aloud: "I will open under one condition. That you count to ten before you enter. I...uh... would like to get covered again."

The Russian grunted his acceptance of the condition, and Natasha withdrew the bolt. Quickly, she crossed back to the bed, her hands working with the buttons of her dress. Skinner caught on and thumbed open the bottle of vodka, spilling a little of it on the blanket. The room was dim with the light of only one candle, and by the time Natasha reached the bed, she was wearing exactly nothing.

SHE PULLED off one of the covers and draped it across her shoulders, swinging it about her white body like a cloak, but leaving enough revealed to show that she wasn't dressed. Skinner pulled the other blanket up to his neck, smiled once at Natasha who stood by the bed, then watched the door swing in.

The blond soldier stalked into the room.

He sniffed at the smell of vodka, glanced briefly and then again at Natasha, who fussed modestly with her blanket, then saw Skinner half-hidden under the covers. "I thought you said he wasn't here."

Natasha shrugged, letting the blanket fall away from one of her shoulders. "We did not want to be disturbed."

The soldier snorted, turned to Skinner. "Go away, Comrade," the American said.

"In a moment. I merely want to finish the job. Your discharge papers, please."

Natasha walked between him and the bed. "You can see Nikolay is not dressed. Just where do you think he carries those papers?"

As a matter of fact, Skinner was fully clothed but, with Natasha, he hoped the blanket would fool the Russian.

"Well," he said, "take me to his clothing. Where is his clothing? I'll find the papers myself."

Skinner got angry then. "Remember, Comrade, a secret mission. Do you want to make a fool of yourself?"

He was a stubborn one, that Russian. "Doubtless everything will be in order. But I want to check on that."

Skinner lay there, unmoving, while the soldier's glance raked the room. "Hey! Where *is* your clothing?"

He pushed Natasha aside and came to the bed. "Where is it?"

Skinner just stared at him.

Swiftly, so swiftly that it caught the C.I.A. man completely by surprise, the soldier ripped the blanket off the bed. Skinner lay there in his denim shirt and trousers. He felt foolish. It looked like his mission inside the Iron Curtain would die before it started, here in Poland, only hours from the beginning. And he might die with it.

"You're dressed," the Red said, "and the woman is not. Now, that's strange. So strange that I'm going to ask both of you to come with me."

Natasha was behind him—but then she was on top of him. She jumped on his back and circled his neck with her arms and the blanket slipped off her to the floor.

"Run!" she cried. "Run!" She fought like a tiger, clawing and scratching, and the blond soldier cursed as he writhed around the room in her grasp, blood trickling down his cheeks from where her nails had raked them.

By the time he threw her clear, de-

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positing her in a sobbing heap on the floor, and then kicking her to make sure she remained that way. Skinner had his .45 out and pointing straight at the Red's belly. "Put your hands on the back of your head," he said quietly. "Clasp them there. If you move a muscle, I'll kill you."

NIGHT IN Pinsk. The first really cold night of the year, with a bitter autumn wind howling in from the Marshlands. And three figures fighting that wind as they cut across the last paved street and set out upon a dirt road that twisted into the swamps east of the city.

"What can we do with this Red?" Natasha demanded.

Skinner shrugged himself more deeply inside the overcoat which had belonged to the girl's father. "I don't know," he confessed. "We couldn't leave him in the city. He'd have them hunting for us without wasting any time about it."

"Well, I know what I'd do, were I in your place."

"Yeah? What's that?"

She spat. "He's a Red, isn't he? And he can get you into trouble, can't he? I'd kill him."

Skinner couldn't see the soldier's face in the darkness, but he knew it must have lost a shade or two of color just then. "We can't kill him," Skinner said. "Not in cold blood."

"No? You'll learn. Listen, Nikolay—I'm not in the underground out of any whim. The Reds killed my brother, and my mother died soon after that. You'll learn."

Skinner had a problem, all right. He had the Red helpless at gunpoint now, but as soon as he released him, the man would go scampering off to warn his fellows. Also, Natasha would find herself in a lot of hot water. Still, the alternative was murder....

The Red Army youth had not lost his arrogance. "How far do you think you can go in the swamps at night? Why don't you turn back and give yourself up, Nikolay? At least you'll have a warm bed to sleep in, eh?"

"I slept in the marshes last night, and I can do it again tonight. That is, Natasha, if you'll sit guard duty with me."

She nodded eagerly, almost too eagerly, Skinner thought. But hell, he had nothing to worry about as far as the girl was concerned. He'd better concentrate on putting as much distance as possible between them and the city. And then they'd worry about sleeping.

SKINNER HAD no watch, guessed that it was after midnight when they stopped. "This ground looks as dry as any," he shouted over the wind.

He paced back and forth for a time while the Russian stretched out on his back and Natasha eased herself down against a tree trunk. "Try to get some sleep," the American told Natasha. "I'll stand the first watch."

"All right—*if* you promise to wake me so I can do my share."

Skinner said he promised, but he wasn't so sure. He'd as soon spend the whole night on guard himself; but in the end he decided to leave it up to his ability to remain alert. If he grew weary, time enough to awaken the girl then.

The soldier slept restlessly, tossing and turning, trembling in the cold. Natasha seemed somewhat more comfortable, but Skinner heard her moan in her sleep more than once. For his own part, he walked a little circle for himself in the clearing, beating his chest briskly to fight off the cold. They'd have about as much of a chance to start a fire in this dank mess as they'd have in the middle of the ocean, with nothing but seaweed

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for kindling.

The minutes dragged by, lengthened into hours. It seemed to grow even darker, and the wind's fury increased. Would dawn never come?

"Nikolay?"

"Huh?"

"You go to sleep now. I will watch."

"Listen," he tried to stop a yawn, couldn't, "I feel wide awake, and—"

"And nothing. I will watch now, that's all."

Wearily, Skinner agreed. Sleeping in this cold would be no picnic, but it would give him a little more strength for tomorrow, and they'd both need that for the trek ahead of them. He gave Natasha the .45, watched her get up, a shadow among shadows in the darkness, heard her flip the gun open.

"Loaded," she grunted with satisfaction, and then Skinner hit the ground. He was asleep almost at once.

HIS LEGS were numb from the cold when he awoke. A gray dawn had seaped into the Pripet with the morning fog, half-hiding the girl and the soldier. They were both standing five or six paces from Skinner, and they were speaking in heated whispers. The Red looked very frightened.

Suddenly, he turned and ran off into the swamps. Natasha did not try to stop him. Instead, Skinner heard the girl counting: "One, two, three, four—"

"What the hell's going on?" Skinner cried.

"Later. Five, six, seven—"

"Damnit, I said what's going on!"

"Eight, nine, ten."

Natasha cocked the .45 and plunged into the swamp.

Silence. Skinner swore softly to himself.

A scream—not a woman's voice, but a man's. After that, more silence, for perhaps the space of a heartbeat. Then Skinner heard the .45 roar once, and once only. In a moment, Natasha appeared again in the clearing, handed Skinner his gun butt first. She said not a word.

"Well?" Skinner demanded.

"Well what?"

"Suppose you tell me what happened."

"Won't it be enough if I say you don't have to worry about the Red?"

"No. What happened?"

"Well, we couldn't go on this way. He'd get us into trouble sooner or later."

"I know that, but I saw no way out."

"I did, I saw one. We played a little game, and I won. Oh, the Red didn't want to play it at first, but I was very firm. I gave him ten seconds to escape, and then I ran after him with your gun. Don't you think it was fair?"

"Then what happened?"

"I said you don't have to worry about the Red any more. You don't."

Anger washed over Skinner in a wave. "Then you murdered him?"

The girl snorted. "Murder, he says! Look, Mr. Nikolay Mironov Smith or whatever your American name is, don't you know we're fighting a war? The Polish underground has been fighting it a long time because the Nazis and the Reds occupied my country at the same time. Other undergrounds fight too—and whoever sent you in here didn't send you in to twiddle your thumbs. When you fight a war you kill, and it's not murder. You kill to protect your home, your people, your—"

Abruptly, she was sobbing. She threw herself at Skinner, burying her face against his shoulder, crying softly,

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over and over, "I had to kill him. I couldn't help it. I had to kill him. . . ."

"We'll get out of here when you're ready," Skinner said. He did not want to argue. He couldn't argue with the girl's logic. She'd done more for the Russian than he'd have done for her had the situation been reversed. At least she'd given him a chance. Skinner knew a long road lay ahead of him, and suddenly he found himself wishing that he had some of the girl's spirit, some part of her ability to accept facts bleakly and coldly for what they were. He realized he would need that in the long days ahead.

"WE'RE ON the frontier now," Natasha said.

Skinner looked around him. The Pripet lay behind them and they stood on a wide grassy plain which rolled off, without change, to the horizon in all directions. They'd reached the tiny town of Luniniec on the second day of their flight, after they'd exhausted the meager supply of food Natasha had taken from Pinsk. There they'd eaten and rested and, from careful questioning, Skinner learned that the natives had heard nothing of a parachute, or a dead Russian soldier. After that, they'd plodded in a northeasterly direction through the swamps, another day and night, until suddenly the bogs faded away behind them, and an occasional farmhouse dotted the land.

Now they stood on the frontier, and Natasha extended her hand. "What is it you Americans do, shake hands?"

Skinner nodded.

"Here, then—shake mine. And good luck, my American friend. If you walk in that direction—" she pointed across the barbed wire fence—"you should reach the village of Slutsk by late afternoon. From there you can get a bus to Bobruisk—and from that point, a train to wherever you're going. Good luck."

"What will you do?"

"Oh, I'll manage. Probably I'll stay for a time in Luniniec with some friends. I'll be back in Pinsk before you know it, and life will go on as if you've never been there."

"There's something else we Americans do," said Skinner. "Poles, too." He put his arms around the girl, felt her buxom figure snuggle up against his chest, kissed her. Lightly at first, then fiercely.

"I never could have made it without you, Natasha. Here, right at the beginning, I'd have been finished."

"Kiss me again, Nikolay. Some day I'll be able to tell my friends what an American kiss is like. Ahh. . . ."

"Goodbye, Natasha," Abruptly he turned, pushed apart two of the strands of wire, stepped through the fence. When he looked again, the girl was trudging back the way they had come. She'd reach the Pripet Marshes at about the same time that he got to Slutsk.

SKINNER approached the clerk in the little depot in Slutsk. "When's the next bus for Bobruisk?"

"There's no 'next bus'. There is only one bus, and that leaves in an hour. Your travel visa, please."

Skinner showed it to the man, a sour-faced old fellow with glasses.

"Umm-m, yes. Seems to be in order. Six rubles, fifty kopeks."

Skinner counted out the unfamiliar change, exchanged it for his ticket, a filthy yellow stub which probably would be collected and used again. "Thank you."

The man looked surprised. "Don't thank me, thank the State. They gave you your visa."

Little things like that, thought Skinner as he clambered into the rickety

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bus. The State this and the State that. The State everything. Meanwhile, he didn't have the vaguest shadow of a plan. The bus to Bobruisk, then—then, what? Another trip to some equally unheard of place? Just poking around the incredible length and breadth of the Eurasian land mass until he found something? It might take years.

And the Russians had stopped their playing with atomic power, suddenly, without warning. Why? Why except that they'd found something so much more powerful that atomics were relegated to the position of Fourth of July—or May Day—firecrackers? No, thought Skinner, the little hick-towns couldn't give him his answer, and the more he dallied, the harder it might be to find that answer. From Bobruisk he'd take the train to Moscow....

SONYA FYODOROVNA Dolohov had a headache. But it didn't stop her work. No, she'd see the man from Lubianka Street in spite of it, she'd merely have to be more careful, that's all. Some wine, some dancing, the wee hours of the morning in her apartment. Then, who could tell? Bah! A big, loud *bah* to Boris Rashevsky and all men! Rashevsky carried Secret Police written all over his stupid face, and like all men, he could be had—for a price. Swaggering Laurenti Beria, who ruled the M.V.D. with an iron will, now *he* might be different. It was said in Moscow that Beria had to answer to no one but Josef Stalin himself.

But for now at least, Sonya need not worry about Laurenti Beria. Just Rashevsky, that clumsy, pawing ape. And, looking at the soft contours of her figure in the mirror as she dressed, smiling and even humming a little tune which was definitely capitalist and hence outlawed, Sonya knew she'd be able to extract the information from Boris Rashevsky, first lieutenant to Beria, head of the M.V.D., the dreaded Secret Police.

Rashevsky strutted in promptly at eight, a huge bull-necked man with a bristly, close-cropped head of graying hair, loose, sensuous lips, beady little pig-eyes which almost seemed to come together, and a ridiculously delicate nose. "Ah, Sonya," he said, smiling broadly.

She allowed her hand to be kissed. "Colonel. My own private Colonel Boris! How good it is to see you—"

"My dear, how I waited for the hour! I fumed and fretted over some paper work—yes, I can fume and fret—I—your gentle Colonel Boris, when it is you I am waiting to see. But Beria stood over me, and Beria wanted the work finished." He sighed. "Beria. Always it is Beria. Is the man a god?"

Rashevsky got alarmed. "Please, my dear, I know you mean nothing, but must you always use those words? God, what is God but a figment of the warped capitalist imagination? And since the capitalists have constructed an Iron Curtain around their countries, we've gone a long way in stamping that myth out.

"And something else. Why, last week I heard you humming something capitalist—"

Sonya smiled demurely. "Well, I promise to do neither again. Now can we go and have some fun?"

RASHEVSKY nodded eagerly, helped Sonya on with her sable wrap—a gift from Beria, months ago, before she'd turned her attentions to the more talkative Rashevsky. Then they took the elevator down to the street, where Rashevsky's long, sleek car awaited them.

The Symphony first, at the Stalin Theater, where the orchestra rendered a stirring performance of Prokofief's

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latest work. It sounded a lot like his earlier and extremely charming *Peter and the Wolf,* Sonya realized, except now the part of Peter was relegated to the benevolent Dictatorships of the Proletariet, wherever they existed, and the lean hungry wolf became Capitalist Imperialism. The triumphant fourth movement was the Korea Movement, and idly Sonya wondered if they'd ever really know what was happening in that tiny Asiatic country.

Later, champagne and caviar at the Club Molotov—restricted to officials of the Kremlin and the M.V.D. and a few lucky foreign diplomats who'd remained much more rational than that man in Yugoslavia—what was his name?

"You see," said Rashevsky, sipping his fifth champagne, "we really have everything the capitalists claim to have. A beautiful club, is it not?"

Sonya smiled. "I've been here before."

The Colonel drank the remainder of his champagne in one gulp, ordered another one from the waiter who stood at attention near the silver urn which held their magnum. Good, thought Sonya, let him grow jealous. It might loosen his thick tongue....

"When?" Rashevsky pouted, small-boy fashion.

"Oh, what's the difference? I'm here with you now, my Colonel. Would you like to dance?"

He nodded, got up, followed her to the dance floor. The band played liltingly the strains of a delicate Strauss waltz. Strauss, the genius of the waltz, who'd come from Austria to Mother Russia to do his wonderful work in a properly invigorating atmosphere.

RASHEVSKY danced clumsily, holding the slim, beautiful girl in a two-hundred-pound bear-hug. She was glad when the music stopped. But then, as Rashevsky led her back to their table, the band played a loud fanfare, and all eyes turned to the elaborate doorway.

Someone spoke into a microphone: "All please rise for the Foreign Office and the M. V. D!"

Shoulder to shoulder, two men came into the room, indifferent to the homage which was their due. Gray-haired, vitriolic Vishinsky, Commissar of the Foreign Office, number three man in the Soviet hierarchy—and dark, swarthy Laurenti Beria, walking with his swaggering stride. Beria—who could tell what place in the hierarchy that mysterious figure filled? Some even hinted at number one, above old Yussov Djugashvilli-Stalin himself....

Beria, head of the Secret Police—certainly the most feared man in all of Russia. But that didn't matter, and Sonya found other thoughts crossing her mind in rapid succession. Vishinsky and Beria together, an oddity. Did it mean, then, that the secret thing which had cast aside the production of atomic bombs was coming to flower? Vishinsky and Beria certainly looked cheerful enough....

"Look how everyone loves them," Rashevsky was saying, as he sat down again. "Isn't it wonderful, my dear?"

"Yes, and I suppose you're right about Commissar Beria—a truly mighty figure."

"Hah—now it is you talking about my chief as if he were...ah...a deity. If you don't stop staring at their table, I think I will suggest we leave this place."

"Suggest it."

"My dear—"

She waved at Beria, who waved back while Vishinsky scowled darkly at this lack of dignity. "Go ahead, my Colonel, suggest it. I don't bite, really, and I'm a little tired anyway."

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"Very well. I'll take you home. My, notice how early it is...."

"THIS CHAMPAGNE of yours is delicious," muttered Rashevsky, placing a big hand on Sonya's lovely white shoulder, where the straps would have been had her evening gown come with straps.

She nestled closer to him, stroked his cheek. "My Colonel..."

"Soft little kitten!"

"Yes, thank you for turning off the lights. It is much more pleasant here in the dark."

"My priceless jewel!"

"You know, of course, I was only trying to make you jealous at the Club Molotov. I don't know much of how you work, but I'll wager that you do an amount equal to Beria's own."

"Why, thank you. Yes, yes, to be sure. I do, but few people realize it. Why, only yesterday..."

"What about yesterday, my Colonel?"

"Kitten! Jewel!" That seemed to be the extent of his imagination.

"I said, what about yesterday?"

"Yesterday? Why, we...no, no, it would only trouble your delicate mind."

"I'm interested."

"No. I have said no."

"Well, is that definite?"

"It is."

Sonya Fyodorovna Dolohov sighed, stood up, put on the lights, lit a cigarette. "I suddenly have a headache," she said, crossing to the door and opening it. "Will you call me next week?"

Rashevsky bowed, mopping his glistening brow with a silk handkerchief. "Sooner, if you'd like. Thursday?"

"Thursday," she agreed, letting him kiss her hand, then closing the door behind him.

Maybe on Thursday the pig-ape would talk....

MOSCOW. Less than a week before—Washington. Striding past the Spazzo House—the American Embassy—Nick Skinner found it hard to believe. If anyone had told him, a week before, that he'd be walking the streets of Moscow within a few days, Skinner would have laughed outright.

He felt suddenly like a fly caught, not on the tenuous outer regions of a spider web, but at the core, where all the spider had to do was wrap its great hairy body around him. And Moscow was a spider's web in more ways than one. Here was the matrix, the core, the hub. But the web wove its way outward in all directions: China, Romania, Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Albania, Poland...insatiable, it trailed delicate filaments invitingly....

No one had told him to contact the Embassy, and he considered it an unwise move. First place, he doubted that the Embassy knew of his presence, and he had no proof of his identity beyond his ability to speak American—something which any good *Russian* spy should be able to do. Also, any contact with the Embassy might make him that much less efficient as a free-roving agent. And finally, if he were caught, and if he'd been working in conjunction with the portfolio boys, they'd find themselves in plenty of hot water too.

Skinner left the Spazzo House behind him, walked the length of Lenin Avenue. There seemed to be as many green-uniformed city police and gray-uniformed soldiers as there were citizens on the crowded streets. Twice Skinner was halted, questioned, then released.

The third time, as he approached the gaunt brick wall of the Kremlin,

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he got a surprise. A soldier, not a policeman, stopped him, and said: "Your papers, Comrade."

Skinner showed them.

"Transient worker, eh? What are you doing in Moscow?"

"Vacation."

"Vacation? Then you're a Sthakanovite. But where's your badge of merit?"

Skinner had pulled a serious boner. Apparently only those workers who produced above and beyond their quotas could expect vacations. "It... has not come yet."

"Not come yet? Either you have it or you don't have a vacation. From Tula, eh? Won't you provincials ever learn you can't pull the wool over our eyes? Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"Just shut your mouth and come along. You'll find out soon enough."

"*Da,*" said Skinner. "I will go."

LAURENTI BERIA pushed back his sleek black hair, grunted with satisfaction when he smiled at himself in the mirror and saw the fine rows of even white teeth. He turned to his aide with part of that smile still lingering on his face, the cold part.

"Colonel Rashevsky, what do you know about the Dolohov woman?"

Rashevsky looked up from his desk, spilling some ink on an official document and cursing softly. "Why... not much. But I do know that she's the loveliest creature in all of Moscow."

"Very lovely," Beria admitted. "Also very deadly. Sonya Fyodorovna Dolohov works for the underground."

"What?"

Beria smiled again. "Are you deaf? I said she works for the underground. As a matter of fact, she's one of their leaders. I've known that for a long time, Rashevsky—"

"My Commissar!" Rashevsky croaked, purpling. "Give me a squad of three men, and I—"

"Don't be ridiculous, Rashevsky. She'd wind you around her little finger and go skipping off into hiding. Also, I don't intend to do a thing about Dolohov—not yet. The agent who informed me, the only man who knew, is now in Siberia. He might have talked, and I don't want it known that we know. You do understand, don't you, Colonel?"

"Well, I... of course I can theorize and—"

"Why don't you just say no?"

"I am confused," said Rashevsky, hanging his head.

"Dolohov is an underground leader. She can take us to other leaders—*pfft*! We will close a ring around them, but not now. When we're ready. Meanwhile, Rashevsky, play your role of the infatuated lover; it fits you well. But don't tell the woman things which you should not like to see fall into the wrong hands. Clear?"

"Clear."

"And don't let anyone know what I have just told you. Clear?"

"Clear."

"Why don't you take the afternoon off and pay your sweetheart a surprise visit of love?"

"But I've hardly done my work!"

"I think the M. V. D. will manage without you for an afternoon. Good day, Colonel."

A SLOW, steady drizzle. A cold October drizzle, chilling the flesh and stiffening the bones. Prelude to the Russian winter, Skinner realized. He wondered if he'd live to see that winter.

The soldier had ushered him, without questions, without a word spoken between them, to a police station, and there, in a rear alley, they'd shoved Skinner on a big open truck along with

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a score of weary Russians.

Now the rain pelted down harder, and Skinner tried to use his tattered overcoat for a hood. The man to his left nudged a gaunt elbow against his ribs.

"Rotten luck, eh, Comrade?" He was an old fellow, Skinner observed; hard to tell how old, but certainly in his sixties. He crouched next to the American in a corner of the truck, his long, impossibly thin body twisted like a pretzel. His face was long, too, matching the body. All in all, very drab—except for the eyes which glowed almost like twin coals in his head.

"You're telling me," Skinner agreed. "I didn't do a thing, but they took me."

The old man's voice was throaty, deep. "As if you have to do anything to get taken."

"Umm-m, true. But I just got in from Tula, and I don't know what's going on."

"Who does? But one can guess, Comrade. Me, I'm from the Crimea, a long way off. A Cossack there, long and long ago—aye, how I remember the old days! A man was a man then because he could split a charging horseman from crown to navel with one blow of his saber. Would you believe that I got fourteen of the Kaiser's best that way?"

Skinner grunted something, waited for the man to continue.

"But you want to know why they took you. Well, ordinarily, they'd resort to the labor pools when they need something done. But I recollect it was different for the uranium mining in the Erz Mountains four or five years ago. Then they merely plucked you off the street, for they believed in quick, decisive action—and they still do, if the thing is so secret they don't want it to get around. One moment you walk the streets of Moscow, the next—who knows?"

"You think it's more uranium mining?" Skinner demanded. This might possibly be a lead, he knew and he didn't want to lose the one slim thread the man offered.

"Uranium! You sure must have vegetated a long time in Tula, comrade. No one mines uranium now, and I mean no one."

"That's interesting."

"Confusing, you mean. The Cominform doesn't let us draw our own conclusions, telling us that since Uncle Joe wants peace, nothing put peace forever and ever, he's stopped all work on atomics. But they speak out of both sides of their mouths, for they tell us all the time to arm, arm, arm against Capitalist Aggression."

"Your talk borders on treason," Skinner said mildly.

The man drew out a long, razor-sharp knife, ran its edge idly over his fingernails. "I don't think so, my friend. You probably were hearing things."

"Don't get me wrong. I said it was treason. I didn't disagree."

The man scratched his head, lowered his voice to a coarse whisper, chanted, sing-song fashion: "East gate, West gate—"

Skinner shrugged. "If that song identifies you and you want me to give the countersign, you're wasting your time. I said I'm new here. I meant it."

The Cossack hunkered down inside his torn cape so that only the top of his grizzled head showed. He whispered, so low that Skinner had to bend close to hear: "I am Tuman Tumanov, Comrade. I don't know where they're taking this truckload of men to work, but I don't intend to go there."

"Nikolay Mironov," Skinner said, reaching for Tumanov's hand and grasping it firmly for a moment. "I'm with you."

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THE TRUCK roared out from its alley, and through the cab's back window Skinner could see the helmeted head of the driver, and next to that the guard's head. Probably the guard carried a gun.

"Now?" Skinner demanded.

But Tumanov smiled. "Have patience, my friend. The results of the Revolution have been with us for more than thirty years. It might take twenty more before the Counter-revolution gains any headway. Meanwhile, we're too close to the police station. Have patience, and I'll let you know."

The truck clattered on over the cobbled byways of Moscow, avoiding for the most part the more crowded avenues, lurching from side to side with the weight of the men in its rear. The rain had turned Skinner's old coat into a sodden ruin.

Tumanov sneezed loudly. "Those *ryua!*" he muttered. "Those stupid fish! They'll make me catch my death of cold out here. Would you rather be indoors, Comrade?"

"I would."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Tumanov got up, a big ungainly creature with a long neck, thin, stooped shoulders and stilt-like legs. Six and a half feet tall, Skinner guessed, and he didn't weigh a hundred and fifty pounds, wringing wet.

They eased themselves toward the rear, pushing their way through the listless men who sat or crouched around them in the truck, taking cautious, wary steps every time the truck lurched. Finally, they reached a little guard-railing, no more than knee-high. Beyond it waited the rain—and a narrow, muddy, deserted street.

"A man could run as fast as we are riding," Tumanov observed. "Jump, then let yourself roll to a stop and you won't get hurt."

Skinner stood poised for a moment, then pitched himself out of the truck. He hit hard, tumbled, rolled over, struck his head against the cobbles. Voices yelled, the truck screeched to a stop, heavy boots pounded back along the cobblestones.

Tumanov helped him to his feet, shook him. "Umm-m, nasty cut on your head. Run, Comrade! Some fool let it be known that we...departed. The guards come now—"

Skinner looked down the street, saw two soldiers some fifty paces away, running for them. One of the Reds held a rifle in his hands, but he made no attempt to use it. Apparently they wanted the prisoners alive for whatever purpose they'd been taken in the first place.

SKINNER ran after Tumanov, crossed the street and plunged into a sliver of an alley which squirmed its way between two houses. Water cascaded down upon them from the eaves, and more than once Skinner stumbled and fell in the oozing mud underfoot. Sure-footed, Tumanov growled over the delay, but always he waited.

They emerged on another street much like the first with its row after row of frame houses, but Skinner didn't have time to look. He heard the soldiers pushing through the narrow passageway with much banging and cursing, and then Tumanov grabbed his arm in a grasp of steel and pulled him along.

The old Cossack knew the city like a rat knows its burrows, darting through alleys which Skinner failed to see until they started through them, leading a wild chase up the twisting side streets, trotting boldly over broad plazas and pushing his way insolently through crowds of passersby who carried on their business in spite of the rain. Skinner, who considered him-

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self in top physical condition, found it hard to keep up with the Cossack, for all his sixty-odd years. It almost appeared that the old man moved lazily, clumsily, his long legs pounding against the cobbles heavily, but Skinner discovered that those great loping strides ate up distance.

Skinner's breath came in rapid gasps, his vision blurred, his head still whirled from the fall. When Tuman Tumanov sauntered casually out upon a wide avenue, even stopping to peer into a shop window and observe the pretty trinkets which were not for sale unless you belonged to the Party, Skinner paused to wipe the blood off his forehead. "You—think—we're clear of—them?" he panted.

"I know we are," Tumanov said, smiling. "Although I was born in the Crimea, I know my Moscow, Comrade Nikolay. We have lost them."

"Well, can they check on us in any way?"

"How? You tell me how. We went through no classification at all, so, unless some soldier happens to recognize us, it is as if we never had been there. Apparently classification would have taken place when the truck reached its destination. But without us, eh?" Tumanov grinned broadly, and a chuckle surfaced from deep down in his belly. "Is it goodbye, then, Comrade Nikolay, after such a pleasant little interlude? I can just see their faces after they get lost in one of those alleys!"

Skinner looked at the man earnestly. "I have no place to go, Tuman. I'd cast my lot with you, if you'll have me. Especially if it means meeting people who know that countersign you tried to get from me."

"It sure could mean that," Tumanov admitted. "But first for a samovar of good hot tea to warm the bones." He led Skinner into a restaurant, humming *Meadowlands* in his deep, booming voice.

CHAPTER III

"JUST WHO are you?" Tumanov demanded, after the tea had been served.

Skinner shrugged. "In Poland recently I asked a girl of Pinsk why her people dwell in the Pripet—"

"By Peter, then! You are a member of the Polish underground!"

Skinner shrugged. "I didn't say that. I might be, but I didn't say. Why don't you let it go at that, Tumanov? If you oppose the regime, as I think you do, why not merely say I am on your side?"

"Nikolay Mironov of Tula, eh? What's the main street of Tula?"

"Lenin Avenue. They used to call it Trotsky Avenue, before what happened in Mexico—"

"All right. And who heads the Tula Soviet?"

"Search me. I haven't been in Tula since before the war."

"Who—never mind! You have your answers ready, Comrade Nikolay, I can see that. Still I would like a dozen kopek for every mile between Tula and where you really come from."

A waiter brought pipes and a pouch of what the Germans would have called *ersatz* tobacco, and selecting his own, Skinner gave the man half a dozen kopek. He tamped the bowl full, lit up, then said to Tumanov: "Wherever I came from, I am here in Moscow for a purpose."

"Aren't we all! What is yours, Nikolay?"

"The government has ceased to worry its head about the manufacture of atomic weapons. Why?"

"Ahh," Tumanov sighed, "that is indeed a good question. We of the underground would like to know the

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same thing in order to pass it along through the proper channels. But all we hear are wild-eyed rumors. Thus-and-so is happening beyond the Ural Mountains, thus-and-so has struck the mining regions in the Erz, Commissar Beria has decided thus-and-so...."

"In other words, you don't know."

"Correct. We'll find out one day, I think. But then it might be too late for the Americans, for the British, for the French—for everyone else. Of one thing I am sure, Nikolay: something strange occurred in the Urals, maybe east of the Urals on the steppes of Siberia where already the Winter winds are howling. It is something which can shatter the current balance of power in the world. But don't ask me what, because I don't know. I think maybe that truck-load of laborers are now on the first leg of a journey which will take them east of the Urals, for there are rumors that masses of equipment must be moved here to Moscow before the Winter snows make the roads impassable. Do I make sense?"

"Uh-huh. Go on."

"There's no place else to go. That's all I know. We have workers who even now try to extract the information. Workers who—Nikolay, why don't you join us? Together, perhaps..."

Skinner emptied his pipe in a large bronze ashtray, placed the pipe down on the table, stood up. "Lead on," he said, smiling. He thanked the fates which had brought him together with this great gangling creature, Tuman Tumanov. Awful rough sledding here in Moscow without him....

SONYA DOLOHOV extended her hand and Skinner took it, shaking hands with the girl eagerly. "So you're the underground leader here in Moscow?"

A very beautiful woman, she smiled almost languidly. "No one said that."

"I say it. We had to pass along more signs and countersigns to get to you than I knew existed."

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "We'll let that pass. Tuman, you said he wanted to join us?"

"That is what I said, Sonya."

"I take it then that you vouch for him?"

"Yes."

"Who recommended him to you?"

"No one. I merely met him in a labor truck, and—"

"Fool!" Sonya backed away as if she had been struck. "One day your impetuosity will get us all into trouble. What do you know of this man?"

"Why, nothing."

Skinner knew this would be different, not like a buxom peasant lass in Poland at all. And certainly he couldn't expect to work alone in Moscow. He started to say something, but the girl raised her hand for silence.

"Your name is Mironov, eh? Where are you from, Mironov?"

Tumanov said, "Tula, he says."

"Will you let him talk?"

Wordless, Skinner showed his papers.

"Then it is Tula, eh Mironov?"

"No, but thoses forgeries would fool everyone from the Secret Police to the Underground, I see."

"All right, then, where are you from?"

"A week ago I walked the streets of another national capital—Washington D.C."

"Washington!" This was Tumanov.

Sonya seemed unimpressed. "I heard him. He said Washington, but can he prove it?"

"No," said Skinner, "not really. I wouldn't make much of a Secret Agent if I carried a little badge which said U.S.A., would I?" He unbuttoned his shirt, reached into the holster and withdrew his .45. He handed it to Sonya. "Does this look Russian?"

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"N-no. I can read a little English. It says 'Colt-.45.' Colt, an American gun, true enough. What's your real name, Mironov?"

"Nick Skinner. But don't call me that—get into the habit, it's Nikolay Mironov."

"Umm-mm," Sonya mused. "An American gun, and when asked his name he didn't offer something stereotyped like Smith or Jones.... Very well, Mironov. I have made up my mind."

SKINNER waited, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He looked at Tumanov, but the old man stared back at him helplessly. Whatever the decision, then, it was the girl's to make—and if negative, she might decide to do with him what Natasha had done with the Red soldier.

"You have more ammunition?" Sonya demanded.

Skinner nodded.

"Give it to me."

Wordless, he unbuttoned his shirt all the way, removed the two cartridge belts, placed them on a table.

The girl opened his .45 removed all the shells but one from the cylinder. "Here," she said, handing him the weapon. "Twirl it."

He spun the cylinder, waited.

"What would you do if I asked you to play a little game of Russian roulette to show your good intentions, Mironov?"

A nice game, Russian roulette, Skinner thought. A lovely game. You took a gun with only one bullet, twirled the cylinder, placed the snout against your temple and pulled the trigger. The odds were distinctly in your favor, but odds have been known to go awry.

Skinner toyed idly with his pistol. "I'd tell you to go to hell. I'm not going to do anything like that to satisfy your damned vanity."

She smiled. "All right. I wasn't going to ask you."

Tumanov eased his lanky frame against a wall, giving vent to a loud sigh.

Then the girl spoke again: "Everything appears to be in your favor, Mironov. I think an M.V.D. operative from Lubianka Street, acting without the initiative of a Westerner, would have accepted the game, taking his chances with Russian roulette. Wait, let me finish. That still doesn't mean I accept you for what you declare yourself. Then I'd play the part of the buffoon, don't you think?

"I offer an alternative, Mironov. We give you a job to do, you do it. Then—we'll see. How does that sound?"

"I have my own work. I didn't come here on any sight-seeing tour. But I guess if that's what you want, that's what I do."

"Good. Sleep here tonight if you like. Tumanov has his quarters downstairs, and I'm sure he'll have a bed for you. Tomorrow, precisely at noon, an M. V. D. courier will cross Lunatcharsky Square, on his way to Lubianka Street. He will carry a briefcase, Mironov. You will bring me that briefcase."

Skinner nodded grimly, reached for his cartridge belts.

"Wait," Sonya told him. "Forget about those. Leave your gun behind as well. If they catch you, those things won't make you look much like Nikolay Mironov of Tula, will they? Tumanov will give you a knife. Tumanov loves his knives, and he has a wonderful collection. Good night."

After the girl left through an inner door, Tumanov set a samovar to boil on the stove. "Smile, my friend," he said. "For a moment I thought she would have you killed."

Skinner frowned. "How did she know about the courier?"

"A remarkable woman, Sonya. Some-

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times she lets the men of Lubianka Street make love to her, and you'd be amazed how they talk. Ahh, the tea is boiling!"

NOON. Lunatcharsky Square with its crowds of people. A crisp, chill autumn day which both remembered summer and foretold winter.

At eleven-fifty-nine, Skinner had arisen from his bench, crossing the Square to where Lubianka Street enters it, waiting there with Tumanov's knife taped under his shirt against his chest. Noon....

The courier strode briskly through the Square, looking neither to right or left, but straight ahead, his uniform neat, the brass buttons polished, the holster hanging freely at his side. In his left hand he carried a bulging brown briefcase, swinging it carelessly with the motions of his stride. He brushed past Skinner close enough to reach out and touch him. But Skinner did the reaching out.

He grabbed the courier's shoulder, spun him around, pulled the knife free of its tape at the same time, hiding it in the crook of his arm from anyone who might pass. "Smile," he said. "Smile or I'll slit your throat."

The courier smiled.

"Now, keep smiling." A man and a woman walked by, wheeling a baby carriage. "Beautiful day, isn't it, Josef?" Skinner asked the courier, pricking the man's chest just above his heart with the knife.

"Q-quite beautiful, Comrade."

"I see you're on time, Josef. Thank you. Now, please give me the briefcase and your holster."

"Yes, Comrade," said the courier, unfastening the holster and giving it to Skinner.

"Now, the briefcase..."

The man started to comply, but suddenly he swung the briefcase around from his left side. It gathered momentum, struck Skinner's face squarely, staggering him. He heard the knife clatter to the sidewalk, juggled the holster for a moment trying to remove the pistol.

Something pile-drived against his stomach, forcing all the air from his lungs. He doubled over, half-aware of a curious crowd gathering. Then he fell.

He still clutched the holster, tore the gun from it now, rolled over. A booted foot stamped down, the heel crushing his wrist against the sidewalk, pinning it there helplessly and throwing the pistol from his fingers.

He scrambled away on his hands and knees, tried to rise, but a wave of nausea rolled up from his stomach, bringing a reeling, spinning sensation to his head. The courier kicked out with his foot again, and Skinner tried to ward off the blow. Partially, his forearm deflected it, but the square toe of the boot crashed against his jaw, its force hardly diminished. He flipped halfway over, then fell on his face.

Something pounded against his head —hard blows which pushed his bloody face down on the sidewalk. The noise of the crowd found a hole and buried itself, and all Skinner heard, until he heard nothing, was the ringing in his ears....

"GOOD AFTERNOON, Colonel Rashevsky."

"My Commissar looks cheerful."

"Indeed I am, Boris. Indeed I am." Laurenti Beria lit a cigarette, twisting his lips to let the smoke out through a corner of his mouth. "Vishinsky informs me that the foreign office nears completion of its work with Project X."

"Satisfactory completion, my Commissar?"

"Yes. It believes everything Vishin-

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sky and his crew have told it. How can it doubt, not having any other criteria on which to base its judgment?"

"Is it ready to cooperate?"

"I would say so. I very definitely would say so. It is developing a fast hatred for the Western world."

Rashevsky licked his thick lips. "Then what remains?"

"Nothing much. We must next convince it to use its tremendous scientific powers against the West, to rid the world of evil and make us ready for a new era. That will be comparatively simple, now that the first task nears its successful end. Rashevsky, you will find some vodka in the top drawer of my desk. I think this calls for a celebration. Careful, careful, you'll upset the flowers. Yes, in that drawer..."

Rashevsky opened the drawer, removed the half-full bottle and two glasses. At that moment, a phone rang. Beria crossed to the desk, picked up the receiver. "Yes? Oh." He held his hand over the mouthpiece. "It's for you, Boris."

"For me? Hello. Yes, this is Colonel Rashevsky. What? Is that so? Is that so? Of course. Naturally. I'll be right down."

"Well?" Beria demanded.

"Urgent," Rashevsky said, opening the door. "An as yet unidentified man attempted to waylay our courier as he crossed the Square. You know, Commissar, the courier who was bringing the written transcript of your talk with the Foreign Office?"

"Did they kill the man?"

"No," Rashevsky growled, rubbing his hands together. "Better yet. They've captured him. He's in the detention room right now."

"Fine. Fine! Be gentle, Boris, but be persuasive. If you have any trouble, feel free to call on me. Perhaps you can forget all about Sonya Dolohov. Perhaps we begin to crack the Underground right now."

Rashevsky grunted thank you under his breath. He'd make up for his feelings of guilt with this Underground agent who waited in the detention room. Sometimes, Boris, he thought, you talk too much. If you hadn't told Sonya how swiftly the M. V. D. can work, if you hadn't demonstrated with the courier who would cross Lunatcharsky Square, this would not have happened. He smiled, remembering the glorious evening, remembering Sonya's lovely white skin, her languid smile, her kisses. Well, as it turned out, no harm had been done, and it was worth it....

"YOU, GET up!"

A soldier prodded Skinner to his feet, gave him a glass of water which he drank gratefully.

A huge, heavy-set man with a bull neck and sensuous face entered the room, his uniform thoroughly bemedaled. Said the soldier: "This is Colonel Rashevsky. You will answer his questions, Comrade."

Rashevsky! Skinner almost choked on his water. These Russians believed in going whole-hog at the drop of a hat. In the Pentagon, Rashevsky was known as the number two man of the M. V. D., right behind Laurenti Beria himself.

"Gently," Colonel Rashevsky chided in his booming voice. "Gently. Would you like to leave Lubianka Street alive, Comrade?"

"I don't blame you. I—bah!" Abruptly, Rashevsky knocked the glass of water from Skinner's hand, grabbed the American's shirt up high near his throat and tugged. "I like this way better, much better. You'll talk—or—"

Someone entered the room, a smaller man, dark, swarthy, rather handsome.

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"Ah, Boris," he shook his head sadly. "I followed you because I suspected something like this would happen. What do you think we are, the old Nazi Gestapo? Primitive barbarians?"

For all its strength, Rashevsky's booming voice was fawning. "I tried, my Commissar. Really I did. I started in the prescribed way. 'Would you like to leave Lubianka Street alive?' I said. But I thought—"

"You thought! Truly, Boris, why don't you leave that to me? Here, I tell you what. You may sit and watch while I demonstrate the proper technique on this frightened young man here. But I'm a busy man, Boris, and I will give you this one demonstration only."

FRIGHTENED young man—yes! Skinner felt like hell, weak, dizzy, his face swollen and bloody. On top of that, he'd had one minute with Colonel Rashevsky of the M. V. D. But Rashevsky rapidly assumed the role of a mere hatchetman. In his place now, enigmatic Laurenti Beria. Molotov, they told you in Washington, might be a yes-man for Stalin. Vishinsky, the same. But not Beria. Beria had a mind of his own, and Beria was the second most dangerous man in Moscow, if not the first....

"...Comrade," Beria was saying, "what my aide started to say was true. Despite what you hear, you *can* leave this building alive. How does that sound to you?"

"It sounds fine."

"What's your name, young man?"

"Mironov, Nikolay. Here are my papers—"

"I don't have to see your papers. I believe you know your name. Where are you from?"

"Tula."

"Tula—a beautiful little city! What brought you to Moscow?"

"Work. I sought work."

"Did you find it?"

"Yes—no!"

"That's an interesting answer. Did you find it?"

"Yes. A man said he would pay me a hundred rubles if I took him that briefcase."

"What man?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't he have a name?"

"He failed to tell me."

"You're lying."

"He failed to tell me."

"Where did you say you'd meet her?"

"Not her. Him. A man, like I said."

"My mistake. Where?"

"In Lunatcharsky Square. On a bench."

"Near the fountain?"

"Yes, near the fountain."

—"Strange, there's no fountain in the Square. What fountain did you have in mind?"

"No fountain. Just in the Square."

"When?"

"12:15."

"A shame. The time is long past. What did they look like?"

"Who?"

"The men."

"One man, just one. Short, heavy, nondescript."

"Nondescript, I see. Did you know the contents of the briefcase?"

"No."

"Their point of origin?"

"No."

"Where was it being taken?"

"I wasn't told."

"Do you know what treason is?"

"Of course I know."

"And what you did—was that treason do you think?"

"You tell me."

"You're no fool, Mironov. It was treason. Now, did the man have a name?"

"I said no."

"Where were you educated, Miro-

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nov?"

"In Tula."

"At the University?"

"Yes. At the University."

"Peculiar. Tula has no University. What did you study at this University which doesn't exist, Nihilism?"

"I. . ."

"Let me see your papers now." Beria lit a cigarette, blew smoke in Skinner's face. "Umm-mm. Tula, all right. Why did you say at the University?"

"I thought you'd like me better if I was educated."

"Why are you free to travel in Russia and Poland?"

"I'm a transient laborer."

"I can read. Why? What can you do?"

"A—lot of things. They gave me the visa in Tula."

Beria took the knife from a guard. "I take it this was yours."

"Yes."

"Where did you get it?"

"The man gave it to me."

"Why did you agree to his proposition?"

"Money. I needed money."

"What did he look like?"

"You asked me that."

"What did he look like?"

"Short, heavy—"

"I know. Nondescript. Do you know who I am?"

"You didn't tell me."

"Do you know?"

"I think you are Commissar Beria."

"Beria, that is who I am. I will talk with you again, Mironov. Guards, take him to Quarters C, please."

Beria was speaking in earnest whispers with Colonel Rashevsky when they led Skinner from the room.

"TUMAN! Tuman, you idiot! You see, Mironov did not return."

"Perhaps he's been caught."

"I doubt it." Sonya paced back and forth for a moment, then put her coat on. "Tuman, this could mean trouble. If he works for the M. V. D. he knows who we are. I will have to warn our—no! I might be followed. Tuman, you've made a mess of things."

The old man sipped his tea noisily. "I still don't think so, Sonya. I believe Mironov told the truth. I believe they have him in Lubianka Street even now, if he's alive. I intend to find out."

"Ridiculous, Tuman! But if you insist, I have a better way. When Rashevsky calls, I will permit him to take me out. Men, bah! After I speak with Rashevsky, I'll find out just how wrong you are."

"Or right," said Tumanov, sipping his tea.

CHAPTER IV

SILENCE and madness.

Quarters C.

Black, black, black. . .

Interminably.

Suddenly, light. Blinding, stabbing agony lancing in through dilated pupils, cutting into the brain, wrenching a scream from the lips.

Laughter. His own? Skinner didn't know.

Then silence again.

Food. A bowl of slops from somewhere.

Thud! A crashing sound, every three seconds. Outside his cell at first, then within it. Outside his head, then within. Thud, thud, thud. . .

Silence.

Silence.

SCREAMING SILENCE!

Damp seeping in, and cold. The damp froze, solidified. The clammy sweat on Skinner's flesh turned to ice. Cold. Almost too cold to move. But you had to move, because if you stood still the cold would get out, and you never would move again. Stamp

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back and forth. Five paces forward, five to the rear. Beat your chest. Work your fingers. Slap your face against the cold.

Another bowl of slops, frozen slops. Suck the ice and it will melt into an odious slush which you can eat. If you can stop trembling long enough to eat.

To survive, the human body can acclimate itself to outrageous temperature changes. Skinner's did. But not necessarily sublte, the Russian torture-chamber is unique in its thoroughness.

Skinner got so he could laugh at the cold. He laughed.

It grew hot. Not slowly, for Skinner hardly remembered that vague midpoint where mounting heat returned the room to normal. Heat merely encroached, at once, and the cold was gone. Broiling, roasting heat took its place.

Moisture evaporated. Lips cracked. Skin parched, blistered. Sweat failed to come. Eyes burned shut. Breathing became an impossible effort.

Cold again. Hot. Cold...

Then normal. Cheery light. Glowing dully at first, easing Skinner's eyes back into the visible spectrum. More light, bright, invigorating.

A table. And food. Delicacies, heaped one on the other in attractive dishes. Caviar, black and red. Champagne. Crisp roast fowl. All the trimmings.

Taste them. Taste—

Spit and retch...

Champagne like dishwater. Worse than dishwater. Bicarbonate-flavored caviar.

Dark silence and another bowl of slops. Dark silence forever, and the slops periodically. Wait for something to happen. Something horrible will happen.

Nothing happened, and that's worse.

Dark and silence and slops.

The M.V.D. had all the time in the world....

AFTER THREE weeks a doctor examined Skinner, shook his head in amazement, permitted them to take him, shaking and afraid, from Quarters C to a bright upstairs room.

"Ah, Mironov," Laurenti Beria said. "How do you feel?"

"Uhh."

"Did you ever play a little game when you were young, Mironov? Associating ideas? I name something, you counter with the first word which comes to your mind. Shall we begin? Red."

"Color."

"Communist."

"Trotsky." *Hah, the Communist they hate.*

"Square."

"Lunatcharsky."

"Remember."

"Forget."

"Briefcase." Beria smiled, lit a cigarette.

"Courier."

"Knife."

"Tuma—blade!" *Careful, Skinner....*

"Knife."

"Blade."

"Knife."

"Blade, blade, blade—"

"Tuma."

"Sound."

"Tuman. Is it Tuman? Tuman who?"

"Name." Skinner felt dizzy, but they stopped him when he tried to sit down.

"Sonya Fyodorovna Dolohov."

"Name." *But how does he know? How does he know? Don't let your heart jump so.*

"Whose?"

"Woman."

"Tuman and Sonya."

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"Man and woman."

"Underground."

"Subway."

"Tula."

"Mother."

"Mironov."

"Nikolay."

Beria leaned forward, crushed out his cigarette. "America."

"Country." *Why America? Coincidence?*

"Iron Curtain."

"Europe."

"Stalin."

"Tito."

"Ah! Tito, eh? You would oppose Stalin, Mironov? Atomic Bomb."

"Stop."

"Project X."

"The unknown quantity."

"Confess."

"Torture."

"Confess."

"Torture."

"Confess?"

"Never!"

Wearily, Beria stood up. "His mind is still sharp, don't you think, Colonel Rashevsky?"

"Yes, my Commissar. Sharp."

"UNFORTUNATELY, it may crack soon. Well, no m..... If we fail here, we have other ways. Take him below, Colonel.' After they had gone, Beria turned to the doctor, a small man with watery eyes and thick glasses. "Well?"

"You will notice that his mind is both keen and hostile. For Stalin his response is Tito—"

"Don't be pedantic!" Beria snorted. "More important than that, my dear doctor, is the fact that he responded to 'atomic bomb' with the word 'stop'. Apparently, he knows something, eh? But we drew a blank with Project X. I'd like to keep Mironov around long enough to find out just what, if anything, he knows of Project X. Do you think 'unknown quantity' might have been a calculated, rational answer?"

"It might indeed have been that, Commissar."

"Could you be more definite?"

"If the Commissar desires—"

"No, no! I want your professional opinion, not an echo of my own thoughts."

"Well, it is impossible to tell. If I had to render a verdict, all I could say is perhaps."

"Perhaps! That's most helpful. Very well, doctor, you're dismissed."

As the medical man shuffled from the room, Boris Rashevsky returned, lit a big cigar, waited for Beria to speak.

"Boris, how is the Polish investigation progressing?"

"Better than we could have hoped. The soldier Svidrigailov did not die. From his oral description, pictures have been drawn, and we're circulating them in Pinsk now. Some day soon the woman should be found."

"I hope so," Beria said, leafing idly through some papers on his desk.

SKINNER was dumbfounded. They gave him a living room, a bedroom, a bath. All the good food he wanted, anything. They let him write his own menu each morning, brought him the food three times a day, excellently prepared. They encouraged reading, stacked the room with hundreds of books. Music was piped in somehow through the walls, and not all of it was the new Communist art which had replaced the accepted—and Capitalistic—forms with its own shallow, one-track theme.

Surprised or not, at first Skinner slunk around his quarters fearfully, expecting calamity to drop upon him at any moment in some new, and more hideous, form of torture.

It failed to materialize.

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It was snowing everywhere except in Red Square, where the sunlight shed a golden radiance

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Four days, five, then a week. Skinneer gained back the weight he had lost. Suspicion and fear faded away slowly. Confidence returned to his stride, to his eyes, to his thoughts, After two weeks he found himself humming along with the music, reading avidly the books they supplied—not all Communist dogma, either.

Once on the fifteenth day a phone in the living room rang, and Skinner picked up the receiver doubtfully. His doubts faded. A girl's voice, pleasant, sweet, cultured. She spoke with him about the city of Tula, a warped conversation about the city, magnifying its beauty, its points of interest, its charm, minimizing what the Communist regime had done there. Skinner's answers were always vague—he had never been closer to Tula than he was at the present moment!

But each day the girl would call, and slowly Skinner grew homesick for the city he had never seen. Its streets its trees, the crystal streams which gurgled in its parks...

On the thirty-first day—Skinner kept his record carefully on a little scratch-pad they had given him—the girl did not call. A day later, the music stopped. Uniformed men came in and carted out Skinner's books. Others came and took the furniture, piece by piece, locking off the bedroom and the bath and leaving Skinner in the now-bare cubicle which had been the living room.

He failed to get his dinner that night. And soon after, the lights in his underground vault faded, leaving him in darkness. He'd come to accept that, for they'd turned the lights off every night, the lights which were recessed in niches high up near the ceiling.

WHEN SKINNER awoke, it was still dark. It remained dark. Pitch-black—and silent...

He tried to accept it with a Stoic calm. But he thought, over and over again: They tricked me. They gave me everything, made me soft, then plunged me back into this! The intensity of his thoughts, and his hatred, bordered on hysteria, but he could not check them.

The phone rang.

Of all the furniture, that alone they'd left in the room, some place on the floor. On hands and knees, Skinner groped for it, found it, placed the receiver at his ear with trembling fingers. Silence.

He placed the receiver back on its cradle in the darkness.

The phone rang.

He picked it up.

Silence.

Keep it off the hook—

It rang anyway.

"Hello? *Hello?* HELLO!"

Silence.

He smiled, picked up the phone, fondled it for a moment when he remembered the nice girl's voice which had spoken of Tula. Then he hurled the instrument at the wall, heard it strike, clatter to the floor.

It went right on ringing.

He lifted it, hurled it again. Still again, heard it shatter.

He sobbed foolishly when it stopped ringing. He sat in the center of the floor, gazing sightlessly into darkness, listening for anything, anything but the utter silence. He wished he hadn't destroyed the phone, wished it could ring again.

Silence.

SOME SMALL corner of his mind remained rational, knew he could not take much of the treatment this time without cracking. Only a few hours, it could not have been more than that, for they hadn't brought his bowl of slops. And yet he felt his mind slipping, slipping....

The lights flashed on brightly. The

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door opened, swung in. Two guards came, lifted him to his feet. Sobbing, he pushed their hands away, stood up straight, marched out of the vault between them. An elevator, going up. A polished corridor, a flight of stairs. A familiar room, a suave, handsome face which Skinner had grown to hate —Laurenti Beria.

"Something came up which made me forget all about the schedule mapped out for you, Mironov. I think you will agree that you're lucky."

"Yes, I'm lucky."

"We're efficient here, Mironov. Quite efficient. I think our efficiency would surprise even you, and from what I've recently been led to believe, you've had intensive training. No, don't answer. You'll see what I mean in a moment. Colonel Rashevsky?"

Rashevsky poked his big head in from another room. "Yes, My Commissar?"

"You will bring in the woman now."

Rashevsky entered the room briskly for all his great bulk, dragging behind him a creature which once had been a young woman. She hardly looked it now. Instead, Skinner saw a gaunt, trembling bag of bones with dirty, loose-hanging yellow skin, flaming cheeks, dull, sullen eyes, dishevelled hair, an unsteady, faltering gait. She waited, halting in Rashevsky's wake, her dull eyes riveted to the floor.

Beria smiled. "You know this woman, Nikolay Mironov?"

Skinner shook his head. "I never saw her before in my life."

"Boris, you will elevate the woman's face, please."

Rashevsky prodded her chin, raised her head, got her glance off the floor. "Miss Palowski," said Beria, "do you know this man?"

The sullen eyes flickered, stared at Skinner. The woman grunted as her eyelids blinked shut.

"You know him?"

"I know him."

"Who is he?"

"He calls himself Nikolay Mironov. He kissed me once, did you know that he kissed me? Oh yes, he did."

"I don't get it," Skinner persisted.

"You will. Her name is Palowski—Natasha Palowski."

NATASHA! This—Natasha? A broken, haggard, skinny wreck of a woman, the buxom Polish lass who, a couple of months ago, had led Skinner through the Pripet Marshes to the Russian frontier?

"I assure you," said Beria, "this is Natasha Palowski. Subjected to the treatment with which you now are familiar, she did not prove quite so strong. Two weeks, and she crumpled. Utterly. You see, Mironov, we've patched together the entire story. A valiant youth of the Red Army, who now is convalescing in a Polish hospital, survived this woman's murderous attack. A trader going from Lunniec to Pinsk found him, brought him in. The soldier described your girl friend here, and it wasn't too difficult to trace her.

"But you, Mironov—you are what intrigues me now. A parachute in the Pripet marshes, a man who speaks Great Russian like a native but who has never before set foot inside our frontier..."

"He is American," Natasha said, *sotto voce*. "Did you know that I was kissed by an American?"

"Yes," Beria repeated quietly. "American. The parachute was of American manufacture, *Mironov*. Surely you'll talk now? More conditioning would be so pointless—"

"What will you do with the girl?"

"Do with her? What *can* we do

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with her? Her mind is hopelessly shattered. She'd be a waste to the State. We'll kill her, of course. Painlessly. Colonel Rashevsky, will you be good enough to take her out and have her shipped to the proper disposal unit? There's no place here on Lubianka Street for that. . . ."

During his first long period of confinement, Skinner's mind had filled with hatred, such stark, cold hatred as he never had known before. But he'd had no place to release it, and the emotion worked like a backlash, got all muddled up and produced hysteria. Now it could be different, now even as he ranted Skinner almost could feel a safety valve letting off necessary steam.

"You filthy, Godless bastard!" he cried. "You contemptible, stinking slime! You—"

RASHEVSKY ran back into the room after giving Natasha over to some guards. He charged at Skinner, struck his face with stinging open-palm blows. Right, left, right—

Skinner took it for a while. Then he bellowed, ducking in under the wild swings and planting his right fist in Rashevsky's ponderous belly. The man let out a loud groan as his face turned purple. He began to fall.

Skinner felt better all the time. Sometimes it could work like that. Maybe a few weeks in the hospital, a few months convalescing at some quiet, peaceful place might have returned him to normal. But there was another way, this way. His body needed no healing; the second phase of Beria's treatment already had supplied that. His mind, then—and his complete loathing for Beria and what he stood for, his opportunity to turn that loathing into action, these were medicine no hospital staff could duplicate.

Skinner did not permit Rashevsky's body to sag to the floor. He caught the huge man under his armpits, spun him around, held him up against the edge of a desk. With his free hand he tore Rashevsky's pistol from its holster. "Sit right where you are, Beria," he said, "or I'll kill this man."

Smiling, Beria shrugged. "I assure you, he is replaceable. Go ahead, kill him if it will make you happy. You still won't get out of here. But I am surprised at Colonel Rashevsky, really surprised."

From the doorway, a guard peered into the room. Skinner snapped off a shot, but the bullet plowed harmlessly into the wall and the guard ducked out of sight.

"He'll be back," Beria promised softly.

From somewhere, an alarm bell clanged loudly. In a moment, Skinner heard the grating of machinery. A thick slab of steel slid down from the ceiling, clanked against the floor, cutting off the doorway.

"You see," said Beria, "you're trapped."

"So are you."

SKINNER let Rashevsky fall. When the man began to squirm around on the floor, Skinner bent over him, applying the butt of the pistol quite unemotionally to his skull. Rashevsky groaned again and was still.

A buzzer sounded on Beria's desk. "My phone," he said.

"Go ahead, answer it."

"Hello? Yes, yes. Of course. Hold on—"

"What is it?"

"This building is sectioned off into steel compartments. We're in one now, Mironov. Do you mind if I call you Mironov, not knowing your real name?"

Damn the man—he was all iron nerves and composure!

"As I was saying, we're blocked off. They want to know if they should

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fill the chamber with tear-gas."

"It'll get you too."

"My dear Mironov, don't you think I know that? Tear gas never killed anyone. But it will render you quite harmless, and—"

"Tell them that at the first trace of tear gas I'll put a bullet through you."

Beria paled slightly, spoke into the phone.

Skinner grunted, said, "Now tell them this! I'm going to take Rashevsky's belt and tie your hands behind your back. I'm going to walk out of this room with you in front of me. Oh, they can get me from behind, I know that. But they won't kill me so quickly that I won't have time to take you with me. Is that clear? Tell them to give me thirty seconds, then to remove that steel door. Tell them we're coming outside. Tell them that if anyone out there makes a hostile move, I'll also kill you. Go ahead, talk!"

Beria relayed the message into his phone, muttered to Skinner: "You'll never get away with it. Where in Moscow can we go?"

"You let me worry about that." Skinner removed Rashevsky's leather belt, worked deftly and quickly with it, securing Beria's hands behind his back, prodding him to his feet.

Again, the clanking of machinery. The metal door scraped on its runners, slid up into the ceiling.

Skinner pushed the chief of the M.V.D. ahead of him into the corridor.

UNIFORMED men stood all along their path in the corridor, grumbling among themselves. Once or twice they blocked the way, made threatening gestures, but Skinner prodded his captive ahead of him with the pistol. The little knots of soldiers dispersed to let them through, but Skinner could almost feel the eyes boring into the small of his back, and more than once he expected the jarring impact of a bullet in one final flash of pain before he stopped feeling anything.

They took an elevator down, and here again anything could happen. One flick of a switch and the soldiers could trap them helplessly in the shaft.

Nothing happened. The door slid soundlessly open on the ground floor, and the American stalked out into a big hall with Beria. More guards. Fifty. A hundred. Skinner let them see him flick the automatic off safety, then he headed for the door.

He opened it—and got a surprise.

Winds howled furiously through Lubianka Street, snow fell in great blinding flurries. The wind piled huge banks of it high against the brick walls. The Russian Winter...

Skinner gestured to a captain with his free hand. "You! Bring winter garments for two. Hurry!"

Beria yawned. "Just where do you think you can go? That snow is three feet deep."

He couldn't answer that one, Skinner knew. A car would not get far, sinking down to its fenders in that fresh-fallen snow. On foot then? Where? He could Beria with him to Sonya and Tumanov, but then what? He'd leave a trail that any doddering old peasant could follow, let alone the M.V.D.

"Stop wracking your brain," Beria advised him. "It is all so futile anyway. Mironov, if I were to tell you something, if I were to tell you what I believe you crossed our frontier to find out, you would then see what I mean."

It sounded like a dodge. Beria might be grasping at straws to save his neck. Still... Skinner shrugged. "Go ahead, talk. But make it fast, be-

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cause when that man comes back with our coats, we get the hell out of here."

"Precisely at noon tomorrow," Beria said, "the United States of America will be destroyed."

CHAPTER IV

SKINNER waved the man with the coats away. Suave Laurenti Beria had the poker face to end all poker faces, and the way he made that statement, he might have been talking about tomorrow's weather. Something was cooking, all right. Something so big that Soviet production of atomic bombs had fallen by the wayside. But this bland statement...

"Go on. Keep talking."

Beria smiled coolly. "Who said I wanted to tell you more?"

"I said. Unless you'd like to settle for a bullet instead. I don't expect to get out of this alive, Beria, so I can kill you now as well as later."

"Better make it now," said Beria, "for I won't talk."

"You'd better! You—"

"You're acting like a hysterical school girl, Mironov. Is that what they teach you in the American Secret Service? Don't you think I know you won't shoot me now? First, you need me to get out of here. Second, you would like to hear more of my story. Third—but must I go on?"

Wearily, Skinner shook his head, then motioned for the man to come forward with his winter garments.

TUMANOV pulled the fur collar up around his ears.

"Wait," Sonya called to him. "It's hopeless, Tuman. You just can't walk down Lubianka Street, and—"

Tumanov shrugged boney shoulders under the great coat. "I have no choice. Your Colonel tells you they have Nick Skinner. Very well. If we find out what the Kremlin has up its sleeve, what better way to pass that information along to where it will be useful than through an American agent? Even if we somehow did get across the frontier, assuming we found out what's going on, who is to say that the Americans will believe us? Skinner they will believe. I will get Skinner."

"Just like that. How, Tuman? How?"

"I will get him," said Tumanov, pushing the door out against the fierce wind, "or I will die trying...."

SKINNER found it difficult climbing into the heavy garments while he kept his gun trained on Laurenti Beria. He faltered once or twice, almost dropped the weapon. He could see the Red Soldiers watching eagerly. If he made one slip, just one small slip, it would be his last....

Finally, it was done. He told the captain to open the big oak door, motioned Beria out through the portal ahead of him. The Russian Winter closed in....

Ten steps. Twenty. Pulling one booted foot out of the snow and pushing it forward. Still, the eerie feeling remained—a bullet might crash into his back at any moment, putting an abrupt end to the whole wild adventure. Well, he would take Beria with him if they fired. Perhaps Beria, stalking through the snow ahead of him, had the same tingling sensation up and down his spine.

There in the snow ahead of them, a figure. Tall and thin even in the overcoat. So tall and so thin that it didn't seem possible, and yet—

"Tuman! I'll be damned!"

"*Tovaritch!* Comrade! Comrade Nick..."

The old Cossack shuffled forward through the snow, a great grin spread-

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ing across his battered face like the spring thaw. He embraced Skinner with long, snake-like arms.

Beria grunted, started to bolt away. But Skinner pushed himself clear of the Cossack, cocking his pistol. "Hold on, Beria! Take one more step, and—"

The leader of the M.V.D. halted, turned and faced them.

Tumanov roared his laughter. "But this is rich! Not only do you escape, but you take Commissar Laurenti Beria with you. Comrade Nick, maybe there is something to this American way of life!"

Skinner smiled. "Can you get us away from here so that the M.V.D. won't be able to follow?"

"Comrade, you insult me! I am a rat, a quick gray rat, and all Moscow is my burrow. Come, and you will see."

Tumanov was as good as his word. Half a block down, then a flight of stairs hidden in an alley, buried under snow. A dark, wet passageway. "Air-raid shelter from the late war," Tumanov grunted, leading them.

Another alley, where you had to fight your way through the drifts of snow. Still another, and underground again. Tumanov must have had the eyes not of a rat, but of a cat.

Out into the snow once more. Shuffle along through it, knife your body into the wind. Down into a pit, through a tunnel, long and winding. Tumanov ahead, rapping on a door above his head. An answering knock, a loud squeaking, a shaft of light cutting down.

They clambered up a rickety ladder—and Sonya Fyodorovna Dolohov waited for them in a cozy living room. "You got him, Tumanov! I take it back, all back, Tuman! Men are wonderful, you big, handsome, grinning ape. And who? Oh, no! The prize catch of them all, Beria. Tuman, I love you passionately...."

"Please be quiet," the Cossack grumbled. "I rescued no one, captured no one. *Tovaritch* Nick did all the work. I hope you have some tea ready. Yes? Splendid."

"SO," SAID Skinner, starting on his third cup of strong dark tea, "that's about it. Now it's your turn, Beria. Tell them what you told me."

"Simple. I merely said that tomorrow, precisely at noon, the United States of America will be destroyed."

Sonya crossed to a cupboard, came back with pipes, gave one each to Skinner and the Cossack. "We have heard rumors," she said. "So many rumors. Yes, there is something new, something terrible. But we don't know what. We have no idea—"

"You'll not get it from me," Beria said. "One way or the other, you will kill me, is it not so? So why should I talk?"

Tumanov grinned coldly. "Commissar Beria, I have heard of your refined tortures on Lubianka Street." He shrugged. "They...have their value. But we Cossacks are more primitive. There is a sliver of burning wood under the fingernails, a beating on the soles of your feet, the slow application of heat to your eyes, a tearing of the ears, the leash of a wild pig attatched to your— But do I make myself clear? It is a question of how you would prefer to die."

Tumanov went back to sipping his tea noisily. Beria looked at him, paled. Smiling cheerfully, Tumanov got up, stretched, lit a fire on the stove. "I will talk," Beria whispered. "What's the difference? There isn't a thing you can do anyway."

Tumanov sighed his disappointment, but Skinner said the one word: "Talk."

"You're an American," Beria said. "You have read the American news-

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papers with their sporadic accounts of—what is it you call them?—flying saucers."

"Sure. Mass hysteria, probably."

"Bah! You Americans make me laugh with your smugness. You can't explain it and so you write it off as simply as that. Do you think we closed all our atomic factories because of mass hysteria? Do you also think that the American continent alone was visited by these... flying saucers? Do you?"

"Go on." The man's crazy, Skinner thought. And yet...

"One landed here, Mironov. East of the Ural Mountains. In it was a creature. Our science, yes, even the Soviet science, is as dust at its feet. Why not, Mironov? It is a vast universe. Far out in each direction, as far as our telescopes can see, horde after horde of galaxies, a hundred million stars in each. The creature gestures vaguely. It is from somewhere out there. We don't know where. We don't care!

"Earth, what is Earth? The prick of a pin on the carcass of an elephant. Less. A virus on the body of a bacterium on the leg of a flea. Do I make myself clear? The creature is from somewhere else, and it happens that its world is a million years further along the road of evolution than is our planet. Fission bombs, fusion bombs, nerve-gas, germ warfare—bah! What are these beside its science? The puny, stumbling, instinctive crying of a new-born babe! *It* has science, Mironov. Science....

"I have seen samples. I have—but no matter. It also has a cold hatred of evil, Mironov. Not emotional, that hatred goes beyond emotions. An intellectual hatred. We took it to Moscow, gave it over to the Cominform, the Foreign Office, my own M.V.D. We showed it the good life, the Russian life. We showed it motion pictures, read it speeches, fed it books. Then we demonstrated the evils of your decadent Western world.

"In short, the creature is indoctrinated. You are no fool, Mironov, and so I imagine you realize our tutelage was...shall we say a trifle biased? The creature believes—firmly, very firmly—that the West is bent on conquest, on enslavement, on destruction. Specifically, the United States. We have fed wood to the fire, have kindled the flames of its wrath.

"In short, Mironov, the creature which stepped out of a flying saucer in the Ural Mountains shall be on demonstration in Red Square tomorrow, shall stay there, unmoving, and shall, precisely at twelve o'clock noon, destroy the United States."

THE FOLLOWING morning. Ten o'clock. Skinner imagined himself all the varieties of a gullible idiot rolled into one. A weird, impossible story, but they could not shake Beria away from it as much as one hair's breadth. And so, cursing impotently, Skinner had left him with Sonya and Tumanov, had set out himself for Red Square.

Yes, Sonya had heard something about a mass meeting in Red Square, but wouldn't they have to postpone it, with the snow still falling? And true, there *could* be life elsewhere in the Universe. Surely everyone who'd seen a flying saucer in the past few years had not downed one drink too many.

Then, had Beria spoken truth? Skinner knew he'd be taking an unwise gamble if he concluded otherwise, Still, what could he do? Inform the American Embassy, watch the courteous diplomats laugh him off politely? He doubted if they could get a message through to Washington in time, anyway. Find the creature, if the creature existed, and let it know

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that the Cominform had fed it a bunch of lies? Sure, just like that—undoing in five minutes months of careful indoctrination!

Any way he turned, he found no solution. He might as well be batting his head against the Kremlin's grim brick walls....

He received his first shock as he cut across Kerensky Street and into the Square which faced Lenin's tomb. All about him, the snow came down, piling up in larger and larger drifts. But it wasn't snowing in Red Square!

The ground: dry. The air: clear. A curtain of snow and cold all around the Square, but not within it. And the huge expanse pulsed with a radiance more golden than sunlight, and more pleasant. Midsummer in Red Square, winter for the rest of Moscow.

Perhaps the Russians had made strides toward conquering the elements, perhaps they'd even travelled further in that direction than Western science. But as Skinner peeled off his overcoat and joined the noisy throngs in Red Square, he knew they could not have gone *this* far. The whole place smacked of an alien science, an alien world....

Laurenti Beria's claims almost seemed modest!

On the balcony over Lenin's tomb rested a platform—perhaps a hundred feet square and glossy black in color, an imposing slab of polished jet. From this the golden radiance seemed to emerge, leaping up in a million million tiny motes and creating a great canopy over all of Red Square.

ATOP THE platform rested—something.

Flying saucer, flying disc, spaceship—what did the name matter? The first man who had seen one of these things, back in 1947, had not called it a saucer at all; he'd merely declared that it moved with a saucer-like motion, spinning, scaling, perhaps like a flat rock thrown out over water. But the name had stuck, Skinner knew, and he remembered the vain effort of the Air Material Command to track down one of the will-o'-the-wisp spacecraft.

This thing on the jet platform atop Lenin's tomb almost *looked* like a saucer! A big golden platter, thirty feet across and certainly no more than six or seven feet thick, with a raised bubble of what looked like glass bulging out from its upper surface.

Around the bubble stoood several figures, but from this distance Skinner could not see them clearly. He pushed through the crowd, elbowing the dull-eyed, jostling workers from his path. Closer...

He recognized Stalin first, a small thick-set man whose military uniform failed to hide a generous paunch, whose moustache seemed in life larger than it did in pictures. To the dictator's left stood plump Molotov, his bald head shining under the golden light, his spectacles reflecting the radiance and hiding his eyes. To Stalin's right—Vishinsky, white-haired, nervous, fidgety. Grouped around them were a trio of lesser dignitaries, one of them wearing the uniform of a Field Marshal.

The crowd roared hysterically when Stalin raised his hand. More roaring, and Stalin smiled, but with the big back moustache protruding down over his upper lip it looked like a leer. Finally the crowd settled back in silence, and scores of Red soldiers in the Square relaxed their grips on bayoneted rifles.

"CITIZENS of the People's Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," Stalin said into a microphone, "we called you to assembly today, here around the tomb

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of our illustrious father, Lenin, to reveal a great thing we have fostered."

The crowd roared.

"We have called down from the sky a friend of the People's Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to help us in our plight. The decadent Western imperialistic capitalists push in on our land from all sides—"

Molotov initiated a hissing and booing. The whole mob hissed and booed.

"We don't desire war. We never have desired war. We desire, instead, peace, like the peace our fine friends in China are bringing to their little neighbor, Korea. Or like the peace we ourselves have carried to the now happy countries of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, to the Baltic States, to—but we need not go on. We are sure you know our intentions.

"We have found a way to bring that peace to all the world. It will entail destruction for some millions of decadent, ruthless capitalistic barbarians who dwell in the dictatorship of the United States. We have learned that recently in the United States a high military tribunal from the Pentagon conducted an investigation of the Senators, the so-called 'people's representatives'. We have learned that this tribunal found thirty-seven Senators guilty of crimes against the State, that is, they spoke out in their frightened voices that the military dictatorship of the United States was conducting itself poorly. We have learned that, as a result, these thirty-seven poor representatives of the people were lined up against a wall of the Lincoln Memorial and shot. And every one of the millions who voted for them in a so-called 'secret ballot' was deprived of his home, of his automobile, of his food allotment, taken away from his wife and children and sent off to a concentration camp in another decadent nation called Canada."

The people in the Square roared their indignation, and Skinner started to sweat. They believed this, they believed every word of it!

"But we stray from the subject. Our friend from the sky has made a study of the world, and he agrees with us. We can have peace—but we must first destroy the Dictatorship of the United States. Our friend from the sky, an impartial observer, can do this for us. We could, of course, do it for ourselves, but with the idea of peace so strong within our hearts, we could not bring ourselves to that. And thus our friend—although he is lofty in his ideals—is not a pacifist. He hence will destroy the Dictatorship of the United States at twelve o'clock noon today, or, in a very few minutes."

Wild, frenzied roaring from the crowd.

Skinner craned his neck to see what was happening on the jet platform. The bubble atop the saucer trembled, shook, slid back. Something popped out. Two feet tall, emerald-green in color, two legs, four arms, wearing a jaunty red uniform, fashioned for him by the tailors of the Kremlin, no doubt. His face looked just like a man's, and just as large, out of all proportion to his spindly body. Like a man's eyes—but behind the eyes, somehow peering out through them, was a million years of wisdom. What fantastic science might lurk at those twenty tiny fingertips? Skinner did not know, but suddenly Beria's words came back to him, and he believed. Yes, the creature could destroy the United States. And naive of everything here on Earth, believing the lies the Kremlin had dreamed up for him, he'd do it, too. He had to be stopped, and fast. But how?

Vishinsky barked into the microphone now, his raw, angry voice cut-

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ting through the crowd like a knife. "You will observe around the Square a series of giant screens," he said.

Skinner looked, and even as the Russian spoke, the screens seemed to slide up out of the pavement, huge shining things. Russian super-science? No! From alien space...

"On each screen you will see an air-view of a city. The cities of the Dictatorship of the United States! At noon, the small black dots of people in the streets on those screens will be seen to fall in great bunches, to be destroyed while not one stone of the cities is harmed. How will this come about? As a leader of your glorious People's' Government, I can understand, naturally. But you will not be able to understand at all.

"It is sufficient to say that deadly cosmic radiation waits in space at all times, emanations called cosmic rays. What protects the Earth from their bombardment is our atmosphere, and over each of these cities, precisely at noon, our friend from the sky will strip a path, a channel, through that atmosphere, allowing the cosmic rays to penetrate.

"In one instant, the tiny dots of people in those streets will be broiled to death by the deadly radiation. The world will be free!"

FASCINATED, Skinner stared at the screens. Pictures swam into view—huge, tri-dimensional, three-color television. Again, not Russian, but alien science!

New York on one screen. Times Square, bustling, alive. Skinner could almost read the news tape on the Times Building. Chicago. Michigan Avenue. The gleaming white Wrigley building. Washington. Pennsylvania Avenue, the mall.

New Orleans, like a giant pinwheel with its crescent streets. San Francisco and the graceful span of the Golden Gate bridge. Los Angeles, sprawling, white, clean. Richmond, with the yellow trollies struggling up the hill to Main Street. Detroit, Philadelphia, Houston, Minneapolis, Boston...

All our major cities, every one of them. And the people in the streets, in their homes, unsuspecting. Late evening in the United States, perhaps one a.m. in New York, midnight in the Midwest, eleven o'clock further West—all the giant cities ablaze with light, the streets alive with movie-goers, with people strolling. Others—asleep for the night, tucked in the security of their beds, little dreaming that destruction hovered overhead.

Even as he watched, Skinner knew that cosmic radiation could kill more efficently and more thoroughly than atom bombs. Strip the atmosphere away momentarily, leave nothing to absorb the rays, and the results would be sheer hell.

Wildly, Skinner tore his gaze away from the screens and sought instead a large clock on the other side of the Square. Ten minutes to twelve! He found himself wondering if the wheels already had been set in motion. Perhaps now there was no way to avert catastrophe. Like a vast, sprawling time-bomb, alien science waited to atomic bombs. Strip the atmosphere above the American cities. Possibly, just possibly, the creature from space still had to activate his mechanisms—

Suddenly, a disturbance on the platform of jet. Another figure had joined the group, snow still melting on his coat. And that meant he'd just come into the golden area from outside, from where the winds of Winter brought snow to Moscow's streets.

Skinner squinted, almost yelled out loud, Beria!

The M.V.D. man stood talking earnestly with Vishinksy, addressing an occasional remark to Stalin, nodding vigorously every time Molotov

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spoke.

Finally, Vishinsky turned to the microphone, said: "All soldiers in Red Square, please alert! We have reason to believe an American agent stands in the crowd. He is armed and dangerous. He is tall, broad of shoulders, with close-cropped black hair, prison style. His identification papers will read 'Nikolay Mironov, a transient worker out of Tula'. Until he is found, the proceedings will be delayed...."

A BREAK, a way out? At least temporarily, Skinner knew, but certainly no more than that. Somehow, Beria had escaped from Sonya and Tumanov. But that didn't matter. Skinner had to delay his capture, had to lose himself so thoroughly in the milling mob that he'd escape detection. It wouldn't be easy.

All around him, the Moscovites gazed suspiciously into one another's faces. A few scattered fights started. Women screamed. That much Skinner liked, but he saw the Red soldiers stalking through the crowd efficiently, pulling all the tall dark men out and lining them up directly under the brick wall of the Kremlin. Skinner slouched down, slumped his shoulders, stared at his feet.

An old woman, her face creased and toothless, cackled in his ear: "You're tall and dark, eh? Aren't you? Stop bending like that. There, I thought so! Are you the American?"

Skinner ducked off into the crowd and the old woman tried to follow, but she was cut off from him almost at once by a hundred pressing bodies. Someone else laid a heavy hand at the base of his neck, a big, ponderous peasant.

"Tall and dark-haired, huh? And maybe you speak English—" The man's fetid breath reeked of decayed food, and Skinner stiff-armed his face away, pulling his hand back quickly when the peasant tried to bite him. Insane mob.

The soldiers came from all sides, observing, seeking. Skinner tried to slouch away, to scowl stupidly, to shuffle his feet like any one of a hundred tired peasants. But abruptly he came face to face with a soldier, and the Red grunted: "All right, Comrade, you fit the description. Come along."

Holding him by an arm, the soldier led Skinner through the mob and over to the gaunt brick wall of the Kremlin, where he was deposited unceremoniously with a score or so of other men, all tall and dark. More came every moment, some laughing foolishly, others looking frightened. Half a dozen soldiers paced off the area, and the men stayed put.

Finally, after what seemed an interminable time and after several hundred men had joined the group at the foot of the brick wall, a squad of soldiers came hurrying through the Square, led by a swaggering if slightly battered Boris Rashevsky, pushing people from their path, using rifle-butts when necessary.

Behind them, smiling arrogantly, walked Laurenti Beria.

CHAPTER VI

BERIA glanced briefly at each of the tall dark men, shook his head irritably. He started to smile again when he saw Skinner, and he said, quietly, "That's the man. Search him for weapons, but do not hurt him. I want him alive."

Skinner darted back toward the fringes of the mob, toward the eager sea of faces which stared at him, but someone stuck out a foot and tripped him. When he got up, crossed bayonets barred his path. Rashevsky slapped him smartly across the face, back-

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handed, and he reeled with the blow. The Colonel lumbered forward to give him more, but Beria stood between them. "That is quite enough, Boris," he said. "You will get your chance later."

They disarmed him, cleared a path through the crowd, led him out through it to the platform atop Lenin's tomb. From all sides, the faces stared at him more with curiosity than with hatred, and even here in the heart of Soviet Russia, Skinner guessed that the masses felt something less than adoration for their rulers. But what did it matter? He'd failed miserably. The clock chimed the quarter hour. Fifteen minutes after twelve. He'd delayed them that long. For fifteen minutes. But the cosmic radiation which hovered over American cities was in no hurry, and when it acted, it would act instantly.

They took Skinner behind the platform to where a flight of wooden stairs climbed its side, and in another moment they ascended. Until they prodded him forward, until Rashevsky pushed him with a big ham of a hand, Skinner stood, mouth agape, staring at the golden saucer from space.

There didn't seem to be a seam on it, nor a bolt, nor a rivet. All of one piece of metal, polished until its surface almost mirrored the Communist brass hats as clearly as a looking glass. Idly, Skinner realized that the green creature had disappeared. Probably he was busy within his saucer; inside the glass bubble, perhaps. But when he faced the dome, Skinner caught a vague glimpse of complex machinery behind it—and that was all. Then did the space-being wait deep inside his ship?

Skinner hardly had time to consider. He began to smile in spite of his predicament. Here he stood on a platform with the men who ruled the Soviet world with absolute authority, and his thoughts wrapped themselves around a little green creature who'd come to Earth from the unknown depths of space.

BERIA strode to Stalin, whispered in the little man's ear. Close up, the dictator presented an ugly appearance. Small, except for his belly which the double-breasted military uniform failed to hide, he stood with one shoulder higher than the other, a plain, coarse man with a pock-marked, ugly face. Skinner found it hard to believe that half the world kowtowed to this small man from Georgian Russia—but there it was.

Stalin turned to face the American after Beria assured him Skinner was unarmed. The dictator sighed, jabbed a finger at Skinner's chest. "Commissar Beria tells me your mission here was to discover what the People's Government of the U.S.S.R. had developed to replace atomic power. You have seen, is it not so?"

Skinner grunted something under his breath.

"You will see more! We will hold you here, on this platform. You will watch the video screens as our friend from the sky makes ready to open the way for—what's the term, Commissar Vishinsky?"

"Cosmic radiation."

"For cosmic radiation. Do you believe this is fitting punishment for you, forcing you to see your country destroyed?"

"I don't have much choice in the matter, do I?"

"If you put it that way, no. And after all this is over, Commissar Beria informs me that one of his men has some business to settle with you. Well, that is their affair. Meanwhile," Stalin rubbed his fat hands together, "in a very few moments we shall stand

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shoulder to shoulder, Mr. American Spy, and watch how the people die in all the cities of your land."

"I expect to dictate terms to the remaining peasants and townsfolk next week, in Washington. There will of course be land reform, giving the land to the Soviets of peasants which will rise in the United States—with the Soviets themselves coming from Russia, naturally. Before long, decadence will leave the North American continent and the glorious New Order will replace it. How does that sound?"

My God, Skinner thought, he's like Hitler and Napoleon rolled into one. Aloud, he said: "Go to hell."

STALIN laughed nervously, but Skinner's mild profanity paled before Vishinsky's tirade. It seemed that he, Skinner, couldn't talk to the Premier like that. It seemed that no one could. Loyal Commies had been interned in Lubianka and then killed for less. Didn't Mr. American Spy know when he was well off? Didn't he want to cherish his last few remaining hours of freedom, before the M.V.D. got him again?

Skinner said he was sorry if he had hurt anyone's feelings, but Mr. Vishinsky could go to hell too. Actually, he knew that wasn't helping matters any, but a terrible wrath had filled his insides and even now threatened to overflow. Mostly, he felt it for himself. He'd come close, so close to success, and then failed utterly. Result: destruction waited for the United States in the hands of a four-armed green midget....

The bubble atop the saucer stirred, rolled back. Out came the little creature, vaulting the rim of the open bubble gracefully and landing almost at Skinner's feet. The American almost wanted to laugh. Here was the agent of disaster, and the top of his shining green dome hardly reached above Skinner's knees.

"This is the American?" demanded the green man in a high, childish treble.

Laurenti Beria nodded.

"Do they all scowl so?"

"It is a national trait," Molotov assured him.

Skinner slumped dejectedly. "I also eat little children."

"Really?" The green man rubbed his dome with one of his upper arms. "No one told me that."

Molotov smiled sagely. "He is lying. Again an American trait."

"Umm-mm, they must be terrible," said the green man. "I'm so glad my ship got lost in space. It gave me an opportunity to land here and right a wrong. Well, I suppose I can get started—"

"Of course," said Stalin, still rubbing his hands together.

Skinner's head whirled. Such a completely naive creature! Naive, yes—but ten thousand generations of science stood behind him and his ignorance of Earth played right into Soviet hands. A happy accident for the Commies, bent on world domination, but doom for the free peoples of the planet.

THE GREEN man danced around for a time, flexing tiny muscles. "Whole banks of dials and levers to work," he mumbled, half to himself. "I do wish I had a little more time."

"Please!" Molotov pleaded. "The decadent capitalists of the West may decide to unleash their atomic bombs at any moment."

"Is that so? Even with their Mr. American spy here—that is his name, isn't it?"

"Yes," agreed Molotov. "Even with him here. They'd sacrifice anything to conquer our free land."

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"Very well," the creature nodded doubtfully. But he still jumped up and down, flexing diminutive muscles.

It was then that Skinner acted. He had no plan—nothing. But another moment or two might be too late, for once the green man closed the bubble over his shining dome...

All eyes on the platform watched the creature from space, and Skinner got to Boris Rashevsky first. Poor Rashevsky, the American thought, astounded at his own objectivity in what must surely be the moment of death. Poor Rashevsky! Probably he'd cut quite a swaggering figure. But Skinner had cut him down to size once, and now as the Colonel gaped at the green creature, Skinner could do it again.

He stepped quickly toward the M.V.D. Colonel, reached out, plucked the long black pistol from its holster. Rashevsky almost fell on his back in surprise, but some of the soldiers down below had seen the action, and they cocked their own rifles.

"Don't shoot!" Molotov wailed into the microphone. "You're liable to hit the Premier!"

The rifles lowered. A roaring, surging sea of sound swept up from Red Square, as more people saw an American loose among their rulers, a gun in his hand.

Slowly, Rashevsky's face turned purple. "You will give me that gun, Mironov." He spit the words out, one slow syllable at a time: "I don't care if I die, not now. You have shamed me, and anyway, they would kill..." Slowly, one small motion at a time, he advanced on Skinner.

From the corner of his eye, the American saw Laurenti Beria creeping up behind him. This would never do. In another moment it would be an abortive one-man war, and he'd lie dead atop Lenin's tomb. He could get Rashevsky, but could he swing around in time to ward off Beria?

Abruptly, he ducked in under Rashevsky's flailing arms as the man reached him, caught the Russian's midsection with his shoulder, and, still holding the gun, swung him up into the air. Bellowing, Rashevsky clawed at his face. From somewhere off in the crowd a rifle barked once, and the Field Marshall, standing near Molotov, pitched forward on his face.

Skinner spun around rapidly, half a dozen times and then again. Centrifugal force flung Rashevsky's limbs out straight, held him helplessly atop Skinner's shoulder. He bellowed and roared, but the noise of the crowd made it sound more like a whimper.

THEN SKINNER dropped quickly to one knee, hurling the man at Beria.

The M.V.D. Commissar ducked, fell forward, and Rashevsky hurtled over his head, tumbling off the flat top of the spaceship and rolling over to the edge of the platform which supported it. He tried to stand up, lost his balance, swung his arms wildly to regain it.

He didn't make it. Still bellowing, he tumbled off the platform, striking the ground thirty feet below. From the way he sprawled, with his head hanging limply off to one side, it looked like his neck was broken. But Skinner couldn't be sure because the crowd swarmed all over him. Perhaps, out of fear more than anything else, the Russian people had bowed under the yoke of their Communist despots, but their hatred for the Secret Police was intense. Like carion they covered Rashevsky....

Skinner turned to Beria. "Stay just where you are, on hands and knees. Don't try to get up, or I'll kill you." He pointed the pistol at Beria's face.

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"This is ridiculous," Molotov stammered. "You can't get away with anything. You're only delaying the end, and—"

The green creature smiled. "It certainly was an interesting demonstration. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes!" Vishinsky hissed. "Get inside your ship and start your machinery."

"Better not," said Skinner.

"Umm-mm. I'm much lighter than that giant you just threw off the ship. I'll wager you could throw me a long distance. No, I'd better not. But on the other hand, my bones are not fragile. They don't break readily. Still, a big brute like you interests me—"

"Hop inside," Skinner said. "And don't lock that bubble. I'm coming in after you."

"Don't tell me what to do! You know, now that I think of it, that's what these men were trying to do, and it can get pretty annoying."

Skinner waved the gun. "If you want to be temperamental and dead, it's all right with me. I could smash this whole crazy ship up, and then where would your Russian friends be?"

"Kill him!" Stalin pleaded. "Someone kill him! Commissar Beria, you'll wind up in your own Quarters C unless you kill him!"

Beria looked at Skinner, remained on hands and knees.

"You know," said the green man, "I could like you, Mr. American Spy. That is, if you didn't come from an evil place. But I could like you because when you try to order me around at least you're blunt about it. Not my friends here, though. Oh, no! They're sly and tricky and they say things which mean other things and—"

"I *will* be damned!" Skinner roared. "Maybe you can be un-indoctrinated yet. Now, get the hell inside that bubble."

Tittering, the creature scampered to the edge of the open bubble, dropping through it within the ship.

Skinner whirled and almost dropped his gun. Tuman Tumanov was mounting the stairs behind the platform, his gaunt head peering over the edge. "Hello, everybody," he said. "It wasn't hard to get up here, not with all that confusion down below. Need any help, *Tovaritch* Skinner?"

Laughing, Skinner shook his head. "I don't think so. But you sure do get around, Tuman. And Sonya, too. My gosh—here comes Sonya!"

Tumanov muttered something, turned for a moment to help the girl onto the platform. Then he strode eagerly toward Stalin, his Premier. "I just thought you'd like to know that I hate your guts, 'Uncle Joe'. I never had a chance to say this before, but I do. Before the Revolution, things weren't exactly perfect, but at least I could ride my horse all over the Crimea and come charging all the way down to Yalta if I wanted. Now, I—can't even own a horse, thanks to you and the New Order—"

"...you see," Sonya was telling Skinner, "Tuman was busy drinking his tea, and Commissar Beria must have slipped his bonds. First thing I knew, he hit me. When I got up and called Tuman, the Commissar was gone. When..."

Skinner was hardly listening. Everything had turned in their favor so suddenly. Everything...

"YOU WILL put down your weapon, Mr. American Spy. Or else I will kill you."

Whirling, Skinner faced the bubble. Perched jauntily on its edge, the little green creature held a thin metal tube in his hand. "It fires an atomic pro-

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jectile the size of your thumb-nail, Mr. American Spy. Don't make me use it."

"I thought you said you like—"

"I am confused. Very confused. Please, drop your weapon. I will count three numbers, spaced at intervals of a second. By then..."

And so it ended, thought Skinner. He'd drop his gun and the soldiers would mount the stairs, would swarm in on him from all sides, would—

He flipped the gun to Tumanov, who was not so surprised that he could not catch it. "Watch them, Tuman. I don't think you have to worry about the big boys too much, they're soft. But watch Beria—"

"One," said the little green creature.

"Listen, you midget," said Skinner, "you're not only a physical midget, but you're an intellectual midget as well."

"What? Two."

"Oh, stop that stupid counting!" Skinner took a cautious step forward. "You let them tell you a pack of lies, and you believe every word of it. If that's intelligence, then I'm a braying jackass. I can't tell you the other side of the story, not in a few seconds, but I could take you where you can get it first hand. Then—"

"Three."

"Okay. Okay, you gave me three. Now shoot!" Skinner took another step. "Well, what's the matter? Shoot!"

"I am thinking."

"It's about time. They filled your head with a lot of pretty theories, I'll bet. But they didn't show you anything, did they? They didn't show you one example of a happy Russian living under their glorious New Order. Did they?"

"N-no. But they said—"

Skinner took another step. "Well, I can take you to America and show you some things which will open those eyes of yours so wide they'll pop right out of your head."

"I don't think I'll like that. I—oh, I see, it is just an idiom."

STILL WALKING slowly, Skinner reached the little creature. He did not try to grab the tube, for one quick movement might be his last. Instead, he stood with hand outstretched and presently the green man dropped the weapon in his palm. "Very well, Mr. American Spy," he said. "Show me."

Turning, Skinner heard a wild battle cry from Tumanov. *"Hy ypa!"* roared the Cossack with an oath that might have been with the Crimean riders for a hundred years. Up and down leaped Tumanov on his long legs. "We have won, Comrade Nick! We have won—"

Skinner tried to yell a warning, but Tumanov was too busy with his own personal celebration to pay any attention to Beria. The M. V. D. chief leaped at him before he could fire, deflecting the gun with his left arm as he charged. The pistol roared once and then clattered to the metallic surface of the spaceship. Skinner barely had time to see Sonya, who'd been hit by the stray bullet, slumping down near the yawning bubble; then he leaped in toward Tumanov and the Commissar, forgetting all about the strange weapon in his hand.

For a brief instant Vishinsky and Molotov barred his path, but Skinner bowled them over like an All-American tackle making two rapid down-field blocks. Dimly, he was aware of something stirring beneath his feet, but he payed it no heed. Both Vishinsky and Molotov got up, darted for the staircase behind the platform. Stalin followed them, pale and trembling, telling Beria what he must do to the

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Cossack before he too clambered down the rickety stairs.

Over and over the two men rolled, the long, lean underground agent from the Crimea and the no-longer suave chief of the M. V. D. Three times Skinner tried to break them up, but three times they rolled out of his reach, clawing and cursing and kicking at one another. Finally, Skinner managed to get the back of Beria's belt in one hand and the collar of his shirt in the other. He heaved mightily, lifting the Commissar off a panting and exhausted Tuman Tumanov and throwing him clear off the ship and out onto the apron of the platform which held it. Beria crouched there, shaking his fist, but he did not try to return.

"Sonya?" Tumanov demanded, getting up.

"I don't know." Skinner helped him to his feet.

They found the girl off the ship on the other side of the apron, flat on her back. Her blouse below her right breast was red and wet, but she smiled feebly when she saw Tumanov.

"I tried to watch the fight, Tuman. Did you . . . win?"

"He won," Skinner lied.

"Good! All men I have felt are idiots. But—not—Tuman, even though—he—likes tea—so much. . . ."

Bullets began to pepper the apron, and some of them clanged against the spaceship's side. Now that the Communists had fled, Skinner and Tumanov made an inviting target, but so far only a few soldiers had worked their way behind the platform to where they could fire effectively. More would come soon.

Tumanov stood up very straight and the bullets *zinged* around him. "She is dead," he said. "Sonya, just like my daughter she was. . . ." Tears welled up in the old man's eyes and, unashamed, he let them fall. Skinner pulled him away, climbed back up to the spaceship, felt something slam against his shoulder, spinning him halfway around. He tottered on the edge for a moment, looking down over a sheer drop of thirty feet and remembering how Rashevsky had fallen.

Slowly, inch by agonizing inch, he pulled himself up. He lay trembling for a moment on the gleaming metal and then he staggered toward the bubble, aware of Tumanov's sobs as the old man followed him.

The green creature poked his head out at them. "Come on, Mr. American Spy! I thought you said something about taking me to America!" It was then that Skinner became aware of the stirring, rumbling sound beneath his feet. Apparently the little man had warmed up his motors—or whatever served for motors on a flying saucer from the depths of stellar space. And that could explain the flight of the Commies: they did not want to get caught on the *outside* of a spaceship, not when it took off.

His left arm numb, Skinner reached the bubble, staggered inside. Tumanov tumbled in after him and, smiling, the green creature slammed it shut. "Shall we go?" he wanted to know.

NO GAS engine. No turbo-jet. Not even rockets. The spaceship simply rose up from its platform, slowly at first, like a helicopter without rotors. Skinner stared outside through the bubble, saw the oriental towers of the Kremlin dropping away slowly beneath them through the snow, saw—

Hands over the edge of the saucer! Laurenti Beria chinned himself up, soon lay full length on the saucer's surface not a dozen feet from the transparent bubble. "He'll be killed," Skinner said. At the last minute Beria had gone along for the ride, getting

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a hand-hold just as the ship took off. But why?

Skinner soon found out. The green creature shrugged wearily. "No, he won't be killed. We'll land slowly and let him off."

Evidently, that was what Beria had in mind. They'd land—and then anything might happen....

Tumanov gritted his teeth. "That Beria! It was Beria who killed my Sonya, forcing the gun to go off. You!"

"Who, me?" asked the green creature.

"Yes, you. Which one of these things controls our flight?"

"Why, this button here. And this one, and this one..."

Tumanov grunted, moved over until he crouched near the instrument panel, his head almost scraping the ceiling in the low cockpit. He stuck out long fingers and pressed the studs at random.

The ship dipped, plunged forward, dipped again, like a frail rowboat near the eye of a hurricane. Outside on the smooth surface of the saucer, Beria swayed helplessly, rolled toward one edge and then the other as the ship pitched.

Tumanov pressed a new combination of buttons, then sighed his satisfaction. Skinner felt himself falling, falling. The floor became the ceiling for one wild instant, and when they had righted themselves and he could look again, the surface of the saucer was empty.

He might have seen a dot dwindling away far astern and below them.

THE SAUCER landed once more inside the Iron Curtain, on a deserted stretch of frontier country within the Pripet Marshes. Tumanov climbed out slowly, shook hands with Skinner. "Perhaps I'll see you again someday, *Tovaritch* Nick."

"I hope so."

"I still have work to do, a lot of work. Out here on the frontier I can get things ready for the time your people are prepared to bring peace to the world—real peace...."

A tall gangling figure, Tuman Tumanov faded off into the swamp. Skinner stared after him until he could see nothing but the swirling clouds of mist. Then he climbed back inside the bubble atop the saucer, fashioning a sling for his injured arm and settling back while the little green man took off again.

That day which Tumanov sought, which Sonya and Natasha and so many others had died for—that day would come soon.

Skinner could picture the stir a flying saucer would create in Washington. A nationwide tour for the green man from space, an official visit to the United Nations, perhaps an offer to vouch for the value of every product which had ever received a three-second commercial on television.

But in the end the man from space would see the truth. With his cultural heritage telling him he must fight evil wherever he saw it, he would place undreamed-of science at the disposal of the United Nations. Because the Commies had seen samples of that science for themselves, it would be a big stick they would be able to understand.

It might—it just might—negate the necessity for war. But if it didn't, no bookie in the world would place his money on the Commies....

As they winged their way West, Skinner felt very good indeed.

THE END

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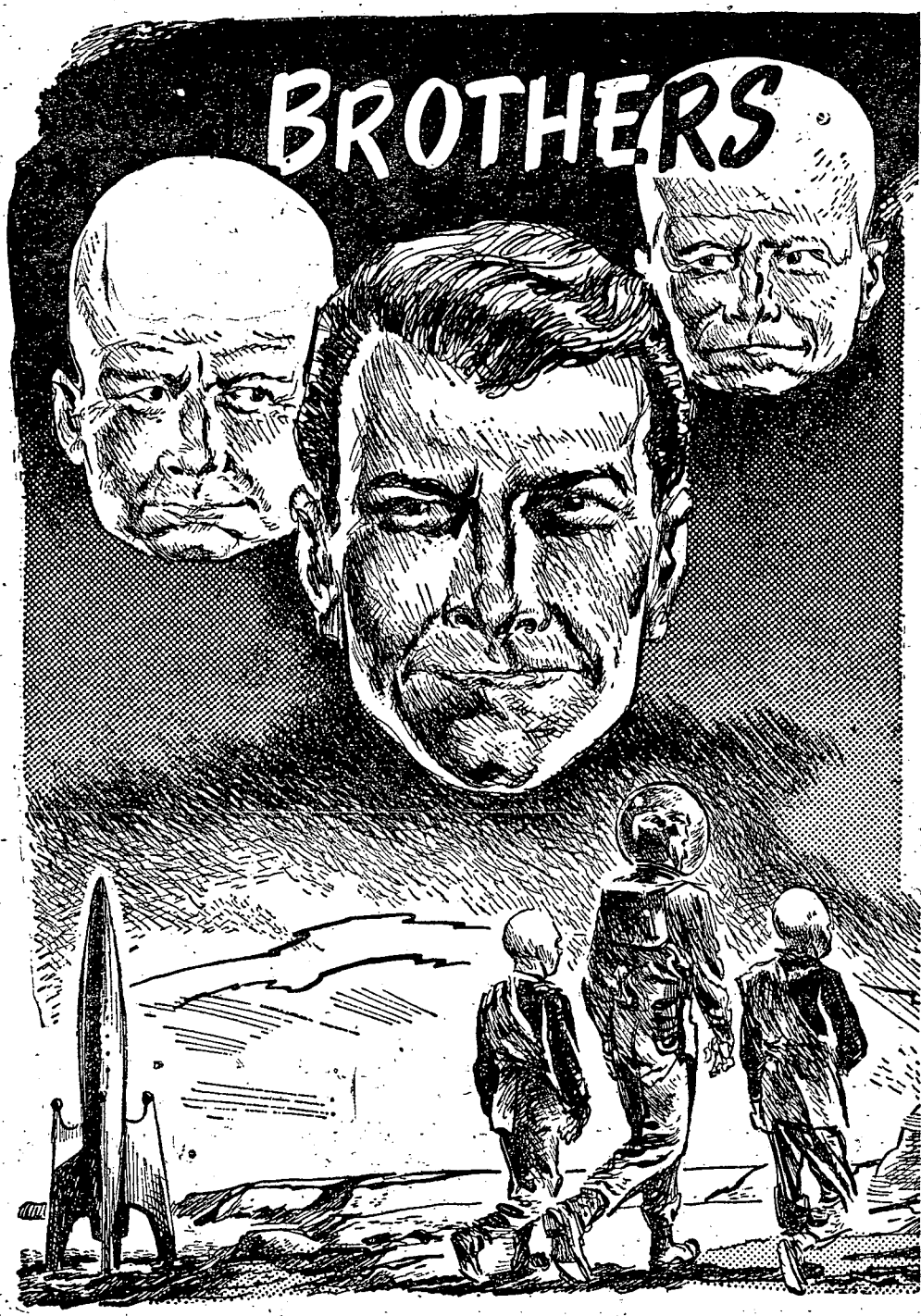

There's nothing in the world that man won't do for his brother. If, that is, brother doesn't want anything done . . .

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BEYOND THE VOID

IT WAS a matter of great satisfaction to Marcusson that he could be with Sam Conrad upon the eve of his great adventure. Marcusson's day had been full; the final briefing during the morning hours at the Foundation headquarters; the many handshakes and well-wishes—these carried over into the afternoon cocktail party given in his honor.

The party had been a boring affair because Marcusson did not care for liquor, the fevered enthusiasm which always went with it, nor the brittle garden variety of compliment:

"Oh Mr. Marcusson! You've no idea how thrilled I am to shake your hand!"

"You'll make it, boy—make it and come back again. A little thing like space won't stop you!"

"Would you just give me one little old autograph, Mr. Marcusson? Here on my scarf. I'd be so thrilled."

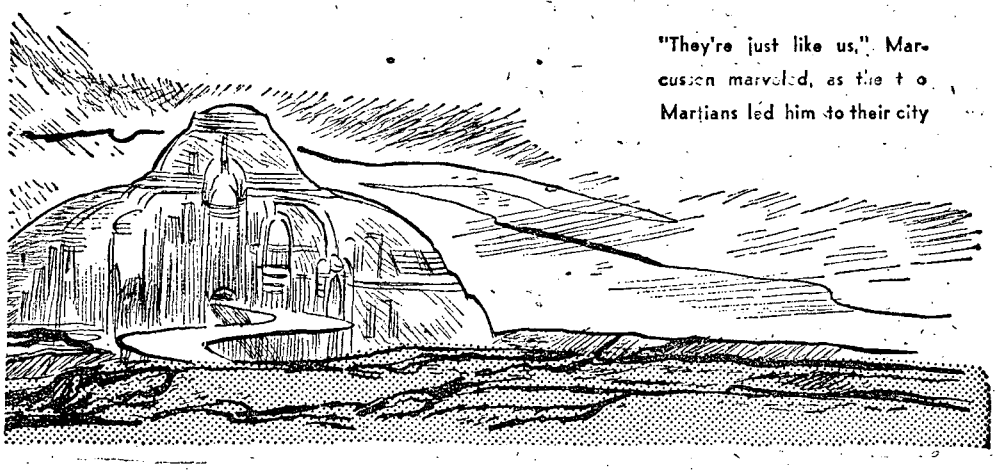
Boring.

So Marcusson had left at the earliest opportunity and hastened away to spend his last evening on earth—for a time at least—with Sam Conrad. They sat on Conrad's vine-covered porch and there was lemonade in a pitcher filled with tinkling cubes of ice; that, the fragrant night, and the quiet restful aura of a true friend.

Wonderful.

Marcusson lay back in his chair and closed his eyes. "I'll remember this," he said.

Sam Conrad puffed on his pipe. "I'm honored. The world's most cur-



"They're just like us," Marcusson marveled, as the two Martians led him to their city

By Paul W. Fairman

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rently famous man comes to visit me."

"Cut it out. My head's crammed full with that kind of rot. It's also full of exact science and cold mathematical calculations. Facts and figures haunt my dreams. I want some good steadying conjecture—some of your tobacco-stained philosophy to wet down the indigestible mass."

"Are you afraid, Charles?"

"No—no, I don't think so." Marcusson leaned suddenly forward in his chair. "Sam—what do you think I'll find?"

Conrad shrugged. "Your men at the Foundation would know more about that than I. Mars is really beyond the abstract and restful philosophies—"

"Let's not kid ourselves. They know nothing at all—I know nothing."

"Nor do I. But let's project a bit from what solid ground we have. We'll look at it this way: you are a lone Earthman hoping to set your feet on the planet Mars. Therefore, your instinctive interest is in your own safety. What sort of people will you find there—if any? Will they haul you from your ship and kick the life out of you? Will they find pleasure in tearing you to pieces?"

"What do you think, Sam?"

THE OLDER man poured two leisurely glasses of lemonade. "We can project with a fair chance of being right. Mars is an old planet. There will certainly be no newly evolved life-forms there. So, if you find living creatures, they will certainly have every right to be called *people*."

"I'll go along with that."

"And *people*, Charles, are the same everywhere."

"I don't know—"

"There is absolutely no reason why they shouldn't be. In constructing humankind, Nature invented a fixed formula—a pattern of behavior built upon basic instincts to meet certain physical needs and spiritual conditions. Those conditions, so far as a *humanoid* is concerned, are the same here on Earth as they would be in the furthest reaches of space. Physical characteristics, of course, are changeable to meet changed geographical and geological conditions. But such things are only trappings; outer garments, so to speak. The spiritual and emotional care of the *humanoid* is as fixed as the stars."

"Then you believe people are the same everywhere?"

"People—wherever they are able to exist—are all the same."

Marcusson left an hour later. He shook hands with Conrad at the gate and pointed to a certain spot in the heavens. "Tomorow night about this time, look just—there. You may not see me, but don't forget to look."

"I certainly shall. Good luck."

As Marcusson drove home, he thought again of Conrad's words and found a comfort in them. Not that he was afraid, he assured himself.

Then he refuted that assertion and admitted the truth. Of course he was afraid. Any man in his position would know fear whether he admitted it or not. So the words of his friend were a comfort.

People—wherever they are able to exist—are all the same. And as he went to sleep, the thought was still there: *People are all the same.*

EVERYTHING went off as scheduled—as smoothly and efficiently as Foundation know-how and money could make it. And Marcusson was struck—later—by how swiftly it all slithered into the past and found a storage-niche in his memory. He thought of this when he was far out in space and there was time to think.

He also thought of Sam Conrad. But the schedule ran true, and before too long there were other things

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to think about. A planet rearing up out of the void to seemingly snatch at his little craft and bring it into strange port.

Here, the mathematics failed to some extent. Marcusson was supposed to have set down in daylight, but as he arced in out of his orbit, the moons of Mars were racing through the sky. This was a bit disappointing, but he set down safely, so the mathematics could not really be charged with failure. He left the ship, cautiously removed his oxygen mask, and found he could breathe. Also, that he was exhausted to a point of physical weakness. He sat down on the cool ground for a moment's rest. He slept.

He awakened. Daylight was blazing down. He blinked.

And saw the Martians.

THERE WERE two of them—males, Marcusson decided. One was about three inches shorter than the other and the taller stood roughly four feet five inches. They wore clothing of a loose, comfortable sort. The garments were dyed in the brightest hues imaginable and, while they hung to body contour, they seemed to be starched or impregnated with some similar substance.

The Martians were not ugly nor especially beautiful from the standpoint of an Earthman's eye. Nor was the land striking in any manner whatsoever. There was a gray spired city off to the left, but the only Martians in sight were the two males who stood at a safe distance regarding him.

One of them was obviously armed. He carried a small stick with a butt set into it at right angles. He gripped the butt tightly in his small fist, but made no motion to use the weapon.

But Marcusson paid scant attention to all this. These were merely the outer trappings—the superficial structurework in which these people existed. He was interested basically and tensely in—the Martians.

He got slowly to his feet, careful to make no sudden movements. They were alert, wary, but not afraid. They had eyes of a particularly clear sea-green, and behind these eyes was intelligence. They paid no attention to the ship, having evidently inspected it to their satisfaction while he slept. They watched Marcusson and discussed him between themselves in a musical language—a pleasant, bird-like warble that gave off most ably the nuances of mood, thought, and inflection for which anyone unfamiliar with a language always listens.

Marcusson tentatively extended a hand, thinking, with elation, that all was well. People were the same everywhere. These could be two Earthmen inspecting an interplanetary arrival on Terra. Their reactions, their natural caution, their instincts, were of the same pattern exactly.

One of them was eyeing the gun on Marcusson's hip. Quite obviously, the Martian knew what it was. Marcusson made no motion toward it. Rather, he smiled and raised his hand, palm outward.

"I am Charles Marcusson. I come from Earth. I come in peace and with a spirit of brotherhood." He didn't expect them to understand, but he had invented that speech during the long hours in void and wanted to get it off his chest.

The Martians glanced at each other with bright interest. They did not speak to Marcusson but discussed something between themselves, glancing now and again at the spires of the city beyond the rolling hills.

IT WAS obvious to Marcusson that they were attempting to arrive at some decision. A moment later he knew this had been accomplished because they nodded in agreement and

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turned their attention to the Earthman.

But cautiously and with ever-present alertness. The one with the weapon motioned—a beckoning motion—after which he pointed across the hills toward a spot somewhat to the right of the city.

Then, both Martians invited Marcusson to walk in that direction by doing so themselves. They stopped, glanced back expectantly, and both of them smiled.

Marcusson chuckled inwardly at these hospitable and kindly gestures. Without hesitation, he moved in the indicated direction. The Martians registered, between themselves, a marked satisfaction. An almost childlike elation, Marcusson thought, at getting their simple ideas across to him. They did not come close, but moved to a point on either side of him and well out of harm's way if he made a quick movement. The armed one kept his weapon ever at ready, but his smile mirrored the friendliness in his mind.

Marcusson estimated they had traveled about four miles when they moved over a low hill and came to the house. Obviously it was a house, but it was like nothing Marcusson had ever seen in the way of a dwelling.

It was a perfect square and no attempt had been made to achieve beauty. Each side ran about twenty feet, and beside it was a smaller square, identical in every respect except size. Grayish windowless walls about ten feet high. Marcusson got the impression of a stockade with a roof, and a tool shed hard by.

The door was merely a section of the wall that pushed inward. Marcusson would have had trouble locating it. One of the Martians opened the door and then both of them stepped back, a careful distance away, and indicated. Marcusson was being invited to precede them.

This he did and was struck immediately by the lighting system inside; or rather, by the apparent absence of a lighting system. He could not discover from whence came the illumination; yet, through some indirect means, there was shadowless light throughout the single room of the house.

Swiftly he took the place in, and marveled at the entirely different manner in which another race on another planet could arrive at the same objective as the inhabitants of Earth. While the contents of the great room bore no similarity to the furnishings of a Terran home, yet there was no doubt that people could live here comfortably and adequately.

They'll be surprised, he thought, *when I tell them about this back in New York.*

The Martians entered behind him, closed the door and looked at each other in complete understanding.

NEVER IN his life had Marcusson had such a feeling of contentment, well-being, and achievement. At times he thought to marvel at how smoothly everything had gone. Time slipped by and he felt no sense of urgency, because each day brought accomplishment in increased knowledge of these people.

He did not see any Martians other than the two in whose house he lived. And he got the idea he was being jealously guarded by these two; sort of an honored guest they didn't care to share with their world.

This amused him and he made no protest because he felt all that could be taken care of in due time. Besides, he was learning a great deal about the Martians. He discovered they were far ahead of Earthlings in many facets of science. The lighting, for instance. He was never able to discover from whence it came. Yet he knew

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that it was artificial.

The small shed next to the house seemed to contain a great many things they needed. He was never invited to enter it and did not press the point, but he felt sure the lighting, the refrigeration, the water supply and all the Martian's conveniences of living originated in that small building.

He was somewhat surprised that, while the two Martians were unfailingly attentive and courteous, they continued to mistrust him. They never came close to him in a pair. Always one stood back on the alert, ready to use the small weapon if necessary.

He discarded his own weapon the first night, as a gesture of friendship. He was disappointed, but not discouraged, when they did not reciprocate.

Yet he had no complaint. It was a little like having two excellent servants to do his bidding night and day.

And he was puzzled at the continual air of anticipation between them. They had long discussions in the soft liquid language and, though he couldn't understand it, he felt it was all of a tenor, always relative to the same subject.

THEN CAME the day he'd hoped for—the day they definitely became more intimate with him. The taller of the two took the initiative in the missionary work, and after a little time Marcusson found out what he was driving at. He wanted to know about the place Marcusson had come from.

Their intercourse took on varied forms. Marcusson printed the word *Earth* on a metal writing plate and the Martian swiftly understood. He put down some spidery hieroglyphics of his own and Marcusson picked up a smattering of the language. But not much. It was very difficult.

Most of the communications were by way of drawings. When Marcusson indicated the Martian domicile with a wave of his arm and then sketched a Terran cottage, the Martian was highly elated and went into conference with his partner.

The Martian evinced a tremendous interest in the sketch and Marcusson elaborated upon it greatly, sketching out the rooms, the furnishings, and several outside angles until the Martian appeared satisfied.

On the day following the final sketching of a Terran dwelling place, Marcusson awoke to find what he rated as almost a miracle. The Martians alertly invited him outside and over the brow of the nearest hill. Marcusson gasped.

They had built him a house.

They watched him closely for his reaction, and were pleased when it was favorable. Marcusson moved forward in a daze, entered the cottage and felt himself to be back on Earth. Every detail of his sketches had been carried out with amazing accuracy. The furniture, the floor-coverings, the wall-paper—even the light fixtures were in place. And when Marcusson snapped a wall switch, the bulbs gave forth the yellow radiance he had known on Terra.

He was astounded. *They are far ahead of us,* he thought. *Beside them, we are children. Here advance science is commonplace. Science of which we have not even dreamed.*

But Conrad was right, he thought warmly. *They are people. Basically they are no different from us.*

Marcusson moved into his new home that night, much to the delight of the Martians. He ate his dinner at a table which could have come from any Terran furniture store. He lay down in a bed any Terran would have been proud to own.

The Martians did not dine with him. Instead they stood by, conversing in their soothing musical language, happiness mirrored in every syllable.

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When darkness fell, they left him alone in his house.

Marcusson filled the early evening hours studying the written Martian language. He had made quite a little progress with the words and could now pick out phrases and whole sentences from the long, narrow books the two Martians had given him.

It was about time, he decided, to widen his areas of research. Tomorow he would insist upon visiting the gray city across the hills.

BUT THE people of the city came to visit him. He arose the next morning and found breakfast awaiting him. But as he sat down to the table, something caught his eye through the window. He arose and went outside.

The Martians were there—hundreds of them—and more coming over the hills from the spired city.

A chill such as he had never known swept through Marcusson. He saw the bars in which he was imprisoned—the cage erected around his house—the sign in Martian lettering he interpreted into his own language and read with horror:

EARTH CREATURE—IN ITS

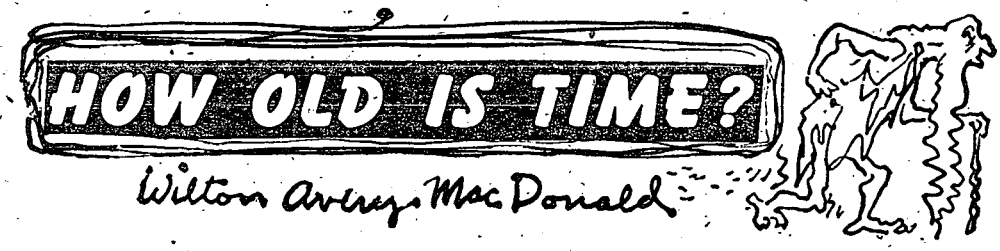
NATURAL HABITAT

He saw the staring eyes of the Martians and realized the full, ghastly truth of Conrad's words: *People are the same everywhere.*

He gripped the cage bars in his fists.

And screamed.

THE END



TO WILLIAM SMITH, an English country boy who was interested in fossils, goes the credit for working out the geologic ages of rock formations. As Smith grew older and became a surveyor and drainage engineer, he still kept his interest in his youthful hobby. He used to pick up petrified shells of many kinds as he hiked over the limestones and shales and clays of southern England. Then he found that any formation he might select had its special fossils. The formation below it contained another kind, the formation above it still another. Smith realized that, by the remains in their rocks, he could tell formations apart.

If fossils distinguished formations, Smith decided, rocks could be put together provided their petrifications were the same. If he found four kinds of shells in a shale, and then the same four kind in limestone two hundred miles away, it might mean that both the shale and the limestone were formed during the same period.

So he made a new collection which showed the fossils of formations in their order from the bottom up. Where one series stopped, another started. He matched them with others which had similar fossils and went on as far as he could. By 1815, he had published a geological map of England and Wales, including part of Scotland, which joined the rocks into formations, showing where they occurred, and arranged them according to their relative ages. Shortly before that he had formulated a table titled "The Order of the Strata, and their imbedded Organic Remains, in the neighborhood of Bath: examined and proved prior to 1799".

Both the table and the map divided strata into groups arranged by the order in which they formed. By comparing new finds with those listed, until they matched, Smith could tell the geologic age of any British formation.

Today, more than 135 years after his map was published, we still use his basic method of comparing formation with formation.

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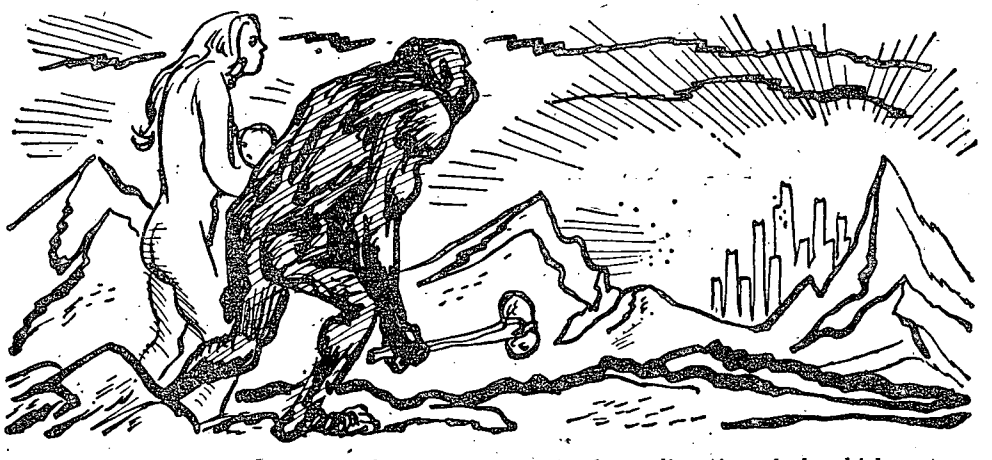
APE TO MAN—IN ONE MILLION YEARS

By E. Bruce Yaches

DARWINIAN EVOLUTION and the descent of the species, profound and influential theories, require considerable modification in the light of new discoveries. So far as Darwin went in describing the slow evolution of the primordial slime-creatures from the sea-depths into the ape, the distant cousin of man, he was right, and science cannot quarrel with the basic principles. The picture of evolution on this score requires only some time-modifications because, with the aid of radioactivity, scientists are able to pin-point events in the past with notable accuracy.

But the story of Man's ascent from the ape requires a complete about-face. It did not occur, as Darwin thought, by means of a series of slow, almost indistinguishable changes taking place over millions of years. That view concerns only the evolution of the ape into the ape-man. Modern man, as we know him, is a comparatively recent creature.



Science can clearly show now that it took about a million years for the tree-living ape to evolve into the Neanderthal man-ape. This evolution was an extremely slow one, exactly in keeping with the Darwinian idea that the brain-case slowly increased in size and the ape became more and more of a ground-living creature. The brain, however, even in the most advanced of man-apes, remained very primitive and simple, hardly worthy of the dignity of the designation. This man-ape is the familiar development of early man which we know under all such names as "Neanderthal," and "Piltdown". Then, about fifty thousand years ago, something happened which caused the direct evolution of modern man, essentially as we are today, in brain capacity, intelligence and physical characteristics!

That, of course, is the major modification in the Darwinian theory. Modern man sprang into being almost full-blown. There was no slow, gradual evolution of primitive man into modern man. It was abrupt and sharp.

Science is naturally upset at this new viewpoint, since it cannot give precise reasons for the abrupt transition. It is too much like an "act of God" to be satisfying. Perhaps some day the answer will be uncovered. Until then, anthropologists must accept the evidence of their instruments and observations and concede that modern man is a truly recent product without a long evolutionary chain of brain-development behind him.

The primary causes of this upset in evolutionary theory come from two sources. One is the radioactive clock which nature has kept running and which is now a time-table for researchers. Measure the natural radioactivity of a fossil with a Geiger counter and you can tell its age quite closely. To supplement this marvelous invention is the discovery that an analysis of the amount of flouine in a specimen provides another direct measure of its age. The combination of the two methods constitutes a reliable check-up preventing confusion and confirming measurements.

So far, and no further modification of this theory is likely, the basic ideas of organic animal evolution remain unchanged, and Darwin has in no way been proved wrong. He merely slipped a little on his time-table, but his principles still remain a glorious monument to human thinking!

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Try taking potluck with humanity,. Mortimer—anything is better than Minerva

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The Travelling Brain

By William P. McGivern

Tired of your wife — or your way of life? Then follow Mortimer Mincing: just press the button, and hit a new combination . . .

MORTIMER MINCING was a very happy man. He had a good, steady job with the Traveller's Bank. His home, while modest and unassuming, was paid for. He was saving regularly for his old age, and his health was good. Physically he was not prepossessing; small, with narrow shoulders and a rather worried look about him, Mortimer was no matinee idol. But his faithful wife Minerva didn't care. "There is more to marriage than . . . ah . . . physical things," she said frequently, pursing her lips distastefully.

Minerva was Mortimer's greatest blessing. She had toned down his youthful exuberance after their marriage, had banked, so to speak, his mildly glowing fires of passion. Life was not a gamble, Minerva had shown him. It was an orderly, business-like affair, to be conducted with propriety and self-restraint. Frugal, determined, and cautious, she had seen to it that they bought their house and car, and planned for their old age. In this dedicated program there had been no time for children or hobbies. "Children cheat you out of your own life," Minerva frequently said with a baleful glance at the heavens—as if her remark were directed against all unborn children who might be scheming to cheat her out of life. "Hobbies are a waste of time," she insisted.

Mortimer, like most men, had looked forward as a young man to raising a family. It wasn't such a

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strong need, obviously, since Minerva had talked him out of it easily enough. But he had enjoyed thinking about having a son: a nice, husky kid he could take to football games, say. Or a daughter. A sweet little kid who'd sit in his lap while he read the comics to her.

But those ideas—"poppycock" was Minerva's word for them—were part of his past, like his golf games, and the poker parties he'd once enjoyed. And good riddance, too, perhaps. The golf was never very important to him. He liked playing in the mornings, when the green fairways were still wet, and the sun was palely warm on the horizon. That was nice, of course. And the kidding around in the locker rooms, and the cup of coffee on the veranda after the match, and the feeling of being clean and tired and relaxed. But he hadn't actually been any good at golf, and Minerva had made him realize it was a waste of time. If you didn't do a thing well, then stop it, was her advice. It was the same with poker. He seldom won. But the stakes were small, and he rather liked sitting around some friend's kitchen table drinking beer, and chatting about work, and hoping for a Royal Flush.

But it was no pastime for a banker, obviously. Not that he was a banker with a capital B. No, Mortimer was just another of the young-old men in clean shirts who worked in Small Loans. Two years ago the president of the bank had looked at him with a slight frown. "Who the hell is that?" he had later asked an assistant. "That's Mortimer Mincing, a very steady chap," he was told. "Been with us sixteen years." "Hmmm," the president had said.

The next day he had stopped at Mortimer's desk and said, "Well, hello there, Mincing. Been hearing good things about you." He had gone on, and had never had any occasion to speak to Mortimer again. But he had left behind a small glow of pride in Mortimer's body. He had told Minerva about it, and she had smiled, pursing her thin lips, obviously pleased. They had speculated for some time about the identity of the person who had said the good things about Mortimer, and what their nature had been; but since nothing ever came of the president's comment they eventually stopped talking about it.

AS USUAL, on this particular March evening, Mortimer entered his home at a quarter of six. He put his hat and coat in the hall closet and entered the living room. Minerva rose from her chair to greet him, a tall, thin woman with graying hair, and a lined, slightly suspicious face. Everything about her was neat and orderly; the plain gray frock, the no-nonsense black shoes, the practical, steel-rimmed spectacles. The room, the house itself, reflected her own air of antiseptic order. It was clean, neat, and colorless.

"Good evening, Mortimer," she said, as he touched her cheeks with his lips.

"Good evening, my dear."

"Dinner will be ready when you wash your hands. Did you have a good day?"

"Oh, yes, the usual. Excuse me, my dear," he said, and went upstairs to the bathroom and washed his hands.

After dinner, which was well-balanced and dietetically impeccable, with a variety of vitamin-crowded things such as leek, chard, kale, and cabbage, Mortimer helped his wife with the dishes. The chores done, the garbage set out in its neat gleaming can, the kitchen door locked and bolted, they repaired to the living room to read through the evening papers. Mor-

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timer didn't smoke—it smelled up the house, Minerva complained—so there was nothing to distract him from the comics, the foreign news, and the little items about townspeople.

Minerva knitted complacently. Another day was done, added to the thousands of others which she had efficiently finished and put behind her. It had been another little triumph. Nothing had gone amiss. Minerva was a good woman by conventional standards. She kept a clean house, set a good table, and didn't run around with strange men. True, she hadn't been tested on this last score—but it could be inferred from her normal conduct that she would meet any such temptation with unflinching sternness. Also, as is the case with conventionally good women, she was generous with lesser, or weaker, creatures. That is, she was generous with moral disapproval.

"The Chadwicks, I see, are having a baby," she announced now, through censure-pinched lips. "They'll find out soon enough what they're getting in for."

"That so?" Mortimer said.

"Yes, indeed. Mark my words! That Florence Chadwick needs a little come-down, if you ask me. Weeding her garden in those shorts, and kissing her husband right out on the street. Oh, they think they're very smart and modern, I'm sure. With their cocktail parties, and friends coming in at all hours. Wait till they have a crying brat on their hands. They'll sing a different tune."

"Weeds the garden in shorts, eh?"

Minerva eyed Mortimer sharply. "Naturally that would interest some men," she said. "I dare say that's why she does it."

MORTIMER looked noncommittal. "Perhaps," he said, knowing that agreement was essential to harmony. Still, the thought of Florence Chadwick in shorts! She was a slim, friendly girl, about nineteen or twenty, with bright blonde hair, and wonderful legs. Mortimer had said good morning to her a few times. The thought of her in shorts, walking and bending in a flower garden, was a sharp prick of desire. He ignored the sensation, turned his mind from the slow, almost forgotten hunger, quickly and guiltily.

"—he's two months behind in his rent, and they're going to chuck him out next week. Good thing, too. He's a disgrace to the neighborhood."

"Who, dear?"

"You might listen while I'm talking," Minerva said, with a little sigh. "I was speaking of Professor Walthouski. Professor, my foot. He's probably some foreign spy."

Professor Walthouski lived across the street from the Mincings. He was a bald-headed gnome of a man who, gossip said, was a once renowned scientist who had suffered some sort of mental crack-up. Mortimer had nodded to him a few times. He seemed all right. Pleasant smile, bright eyes. But lonely. As if he were waiting for mail, or for someone to talk to him. He'd asked Mortimer in for a cup of coffee once, but Mortimer had declined. He knew how Minerva felt about the old man, and he didn't want to upset her.

"Yes, they're chucking him out," Minerva said, in a satisfied voice. "I never trusted him, you know. He's a foreigner, and you can't trust foreigners. I'll be glad to get a decent, God-fearing American in his place."

"Yes, that would be nice," Mortimer said absently.

It was then nine o'clock. Minerva put away her sewing. She and Mortimer retired early. It was the healthy way of life. No salt or spices, plenty

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of chard, kale, and cabbage, no tobacco or liquor, of course, and plenty of calm, refreshing sleep. When Mortimer's time at the bank was up, they were going to spend their declining years at a little resort in the Eastern mountains. It was the place where they now took their vacations. A two-storied hotel, it catered to a genteel clientele consisting mainly of retired school teachers and asthma victims. It faced a rocky field that sloped up a low mountain. On good days everyone sat in rockers on the porch and looked at the rocky field. When it rained one sat inside and looked at the samplers on the wall. It suited Minerva ideally, and of course Mortimer liked it too. That's why they led such abstemious, healthful lives. In order to have that many more years to rest and regard the rocky field.

"I'm going up now, my dear," Minerva said. "You'll be coming presently?"

"Of course, my dear," Mortimer said, standing. He wound the clock and was about ready to snap off the lights when the front doorbell rang.

MINERVA put a hand nervously to her throat. She was the type who always expected the worst. Penny postcards were portents of disaster until she had skimmed their inevitably serene messages. Anything outside her rigid little life was ominous and suspicious. And a caller at nine in the evening was miles outside her life.

"Go to the door, Mortimer."

"Very well." Mortimer opened the door and blinked with surprise at the smiling but care-lined face of Professor Walthouski.

"Good evening," the professor said hopefully. He had a large box under his arm, and his near-sighted eyes were entreating. "I saw your light and . . . I thought I'd come in and say —well, you know, hello."

"We were just retiring," Minerva said.

"Oh, I see," the professor's tone cried of disappointment. He was a small man, with bushy gray hair, and a kind but hopeless-looking face. "You see, I needed someone to talk to, and I thought—"

"Come in for a moment, anyway," Mortimer said. His words shocked him slightly. Inwardly, he cringed from Minerva's reaction. But she contented herself with a little sniff. "I'm going on up," she said. "I shall expect you shortly. Good night, Professor." She used his title the way she would throw out the word *dogcatcher*.

She ascended the stairs, a picture of stately irritation, and Mortimer led the professor into the living room and snapped on the light. "Sit down," he said.

"Thank you, thank you," the professor said. He seemed overcome by the hospitality. He put his burden on the coffee table, and drew a large slightly soiled handkerchief from his pocket. He blew his nose lustily and then returned the handkerchief to his pocket. "You see, I had to talk to someone tonight," he said. "It is so good of you to help me."

"Why do you have to talk to someone tonight?"

The professor patted the heavy box which he had placed on the coffee table, and said, "This is the reason. My last invention, and my greatest one, Mr. Mincing."

MORTIMER looked at the box with more interest. It was about the size of a table radio, and one side of it was generously studded with dials and rheostats. Two rubber tubes emerged from the inside of the box, and at the ends of these hung a gadget that looked like a doctor's stethescope.

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"What is it?" Mortimer asked.

"Well—this sounds silly, I know—but I'm not quite sure," the professor said apologetically. "It began years ago as a means to improve the practise of anesthesia. I worked on the principle that if the brain, memory and personality of a man could be removed from his body during an operation, then the body would naturally feel no pain."

"Well, that's logical enough," Mortimer said, rather interested.

"Yes, but where would the mind go when it left the body? That was the problem. Finally, I worked out a theory. We could send the brain to the mind of another human being. Supposing, for instance a man was being operated upon. We divorce his body from his brain. We send the brain to his wife, where it would, to put it simply, set up housekeeping until it was time to return to its own body."

Mortimer thought of setting up housekeeping in Minerva's mind, and shivered slightly.

The professor was smiling triumphantly. "You see how it works out?"

"Yes, yes," Mortimer said. "Then what's your problem?"

"That's the hitch," the professor said, chewing his lip. "There *is* a problem. I couldn't control just *where* the brain would go, you see. It might wind up in the head of some diamond miner in Africa, for all I could tell."

"Well, it would be rather exciting for the...ah...travelling brain, I think," Mortimer said. He had determined to humor the old boy, although he was obviously a prime loony-bin candidate.

"Yes, but its not very scientific," the professor said, chewing his lips again. "Also, I couldn't be sure that I could get the brain back into its original body. That could cause all sorts of trouble, of course."

"Oh, yes, indeed," Mortimer said.

"The thing is, I've never tried it on anyone," the professor said, looking at Mortimer with an expression of hopeful appraisal. "I...well, I don't know how to put it, but I've been getting forgetful of late. I'm slipping a bit, I think. And this is my last invention. But before I end my career I'd like to try it on someone."

"Well, naturally," Mortimer said.

"You do see my problem, don't you?" the professor said eagerly. "You will help me, won't you?"

"*I?*" Mortimer said.

"Yes, I have no one else to turn to."

MORTIMER thought of half dozen ways of saying no. But then he reconsidered. It wouldn't take more than a minute or so, and it would please this old man. "All right," he said.

"I'll never be able to thank you," the professor said, his voice trembling with emotion.

He stood up eagerly and lifted the dangling rubber tubes in his hand. "Just put these in your ears," he said, handing the stethescope-like appendages to Mortimer. "They won't hurt, you'll feel nothing at all."

"Very well," Mortimer said, doing as he was told. He hoped Minerva wouldn't get it in her head to come down. He'd never hear the end of this.

The professor flicked a switch on the box and a faint, not unpleasant humming filled Mortimer's head. He leaned back comfortably in the chair.

The professor reached cautiously for another switch. "Have to be very careful now," he muttered. There were two switches of the same size set close together, and the professor's hand hovered indecisively for an instant over them. "The one on the *left* is

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temporary," he said at last, nodding his head vigorously. "The one on the *right* is permanent. That one—the *right* one—would send the brain out of the body forever." He paused, frowning. "I think it would," he added dubiously. "Now, are you ready?"

"All set," Mortimer said.

"Very well!" The professor closed the left switch.

The humming ceased. Mortimer opened his eyes in slight surprise. He felt suddenly dizzy. "Hey, wait a minute," he said. "Let's don't carry this too far." He reached for the plugs in his ears, intending to pull them out. But his hand fell limply in his lap. He slumped in the chair, breathing easily, a faint smile on his lips.

It looked as if he had merely fallen asleep.

"HEY, WAKE up, Angelo! I ain't got all day to spend buying a pound of tomatoes."

The words penetrated Mortimer's mind, caused his eyes to flutter open. He found himself staring up at a large, smiling, middle-aged woman who had a market basket on her arm. Mortimer blinked his eyes. *Who was this person?*

"Come on," the woman said good-naturedly. "You ain't no millionaire, Angelo, what can sleep all afternoon."

Mortimer stared past her, around her, and his eyes widened. He was in a fruit and vegetable shop. Crates of beans, tomatoes, oranges, peppers, and cabbages, were stacked around the walls. He himself was sitting behind a low wooden counter and, as his eyes came downward, he saw that he wore a large white apron over denim overalls. He scratched his head anxiously, felt strong thick hair under his fingers. *Something was wrong!* Mortimer's hair was thin and scanty, a breeze could cause it to float upward in gentle waves. But this hair—it was like steel wool.

"Come on," the woman said again. "Tomatoes. Remember?"

A lifetime of obedience came to Mortimer's aid. "All right," he said, but the voice wasn't his own; it was a deep voice, rich and strong.

Subconsciously, through some psychic instrument of perception, Mortimer must have known what had happened to him, the minute he opened his eyes and found himself in a fruit shop. Because he knew now—and he accepted with a fantastic calmness. Therefore, he must have been prepared for it; otherwise he might have gone mad.

The thing he knew was that the professor's Rube Goldbergish invention had worked—and that Mortimer Mincing, beloved husband of Minerva Mincing, and assistant chief clerk in the Small Loans department of the Traveller's Bank, had been transplanted into a new environment, a new physical framework. His mind, his memory, his soul, was in the body of a man named Angelo, the owner (it could be hoped) of a fruit store. The comedown was collossal! Mortimer felt cheated. From a responsible job in a bank to this. It was highway robbery! The only thing he'd got out of the deal was a good head of hair.

DISPIRITEDLY, he moved around the counter, picking up a brown paper sack on the way. His hand moved out for it automatically, instinctively, and he realized with surprise that Angelo's (whoever *he* was) motor reflexes were still functioning. He selected two pounds of tomatoes with experienced accuracy, weighed them out, and took the woman's money. When she had gone Mortimer waited a moment, then hurried into the street and looked at his reflec-

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tion in the plate glass window. He saw a big man, solidly built, about forty. Angelo had a strong solid face, with a touch of humor in it, and level brown eyes. Not a handsome man, really, but a strong man, and one you might trust. That was Mortimer's conclusion, based on years of studying prospective borrowers. Yes, this Angelo looked all right.

Mortimer wandered back into the store, feeling at loose ends. Strangely, however, he experienced no sense of loneliness or homesickness. He sat down again behind the counter, looking with satisfaction at the crates of fresh, colorful vegetables and fruit. There was an account book on the counter. Mortimer picked it up, glanced through it. It was badly kept, the heavy figures scrawled together and running over each other, but Mortimer's experienced eyes picked order from the confusion. Things weren't going too well here, he saw. Overhead was up, income was down. Mortimer pursed his lips, frowned.

A door opened. A warm, happy voice called: "Angelo! What d'ya want for lunch?"

Mortimer looked up, startled. A woman had appeared from the rear of the shop, from a doorway that apparently led back to living quarters.

She was a tall woman, with a strong full-bosomed body, and long shining black hair. Her lips were very red without lipstick, and her eyes were blue, bright with humor and contentment. She was wonderful to look at, Mortimer thought. Everything about her was blooming and confident—her fair skin with its underblush of warm passionate health, her wide hips, her long straight legs. But it was something else, a look on her face, that moved him most. He had never seen such a look on a woman's face. It was a look of love, and it startled and confused him.

"Oh, stop worrying about the store," she said, taking the book from his hand. She sat on his knee and rumpled his hair. "Things'll work out okay."

MORTIMER felt his soul warm and expand under the glow of her loving eyes. It wasn't for him, this tenderness, this confidence, this feeling; it was for Angelo. But Mortimer took it regardless, as a hungry man would snatch at a crust of bread.

"What about lunch?" she said. "Would spaghetti, a steak, and some cheese be okay? With wine?"

Mortimer's gastric juices roiled. "Sure, sure, that's wonderful," he said.

"Okay, I'll get at it," she said, and kissed him hard on the mouth. "That'll hold you till lunch. By the way, that Johnson kid is coming in to see you." She stood up and smoothed down her dress. "He's pretty upset, you know, going off to the army and everything. Try and help him, will you?" She smiled and touched his cheek with the back of her fingers. "Silly question. You'd help anybody, I know, if you could."

Mortimer wet his lips. "Why is he coming to me?"

"Well, you're the smartest guy on the block, aren't you?" she said. "That's reason enough, I guess. Who should he go to? O'Brien, the druggist? Meyers, the real-estate man? I guess not."

"How am I the smartest man on the block when I can't even run a fruit store?" Mortimer asked her, perplexed.

"Oh, you do all right with the store," she said. "But that kind of stuff just takes brains. You know, making money, things like that. But you got heart, Angelo. And people with heart are the smartest people, and everybody knows it. Now, don't take too long with him. Lunch is in

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half an hour."

Ten minutes later a tall, rangy, awkward boy of eighteen or nineteen came in. He had wheat-colored blond hair, and a shy, likable grin. "Hello, Mr. Moravia," he said, putting out a large square hand.

"Hello, son."

"I just thought I'd come over and have a little talk with you, Mr. Moravia."

"Sure, sure. Sit down, why don't you?" Mortimer didn't know how Angelo would have acted, but he guessed it would be friendly and natural. "Now, what's on your mind?"

"Well, I don't know," the Johnson boy said, scratching his head. "You see, I'm going into the army. And I'm—well, I'm in love with Millie Anders. You know her, of course." His eyes lit up. "She's the blonde girl with the funny little smile who works in Kaplan's delicatessen."

"Oh, sure, sure," Mortimer said, already feeling beyond his depth.

The Johnson boy frowned. "Well, we want to get married, but we—me, I guess, really—can't make up our minds. You see, I don't have any future, and I don't feel right asking Millie to marry me. But it's a tough decision. I kind of hate to leave her, you know, not knowing if I'll ever get back to her."

"You're sure you love each other?"

"Yeah, that's definite," the Johnson boy said quietly.

MORTIMER RUBBED his chin. What could he tell this boy? He, himself, knew nothing of love, or of war, or of life's uncertainties. His life had been planned like a time-table by Minerva. But he was remembering the look on Angelo's wife's face. It was a look he'd never known, but it was a fine thing. "Look, loving each other is a big thing, maybe the biggest thing," he said. (What else would Angelo say? Mortimer thought frantically.) "Another thing, you got a future, don't think you haven't. The job you got to do is an important one, and isn't that what a future is? Having something important to do?"

"I never thought of it that way," the Johnson boy said.

Mortimer frowned. He'd never taken chances, risked anything. Maybe that was the best way, to go through life protected, coated with caution.

"Millie's a funny girl," the Johnson boy said. "She likes me to have fun. She says that's fun for her, too. You know, she don't bowl, but she makes me go once a week because she knows I like it. And she wants me to play cards with the boys, because—"

"Marry her," Mortimer said abruptly. He hardly realized he'd spoken. But his voice was firm as he repeated: "Marry her. You've got a prize there, son. Don't pass it up. You've got a future. You've both got a future. Remember that."

"Gosh, I sure will, Mr. Moravia," the Johnson boy said warmly. "Thanks a million."

Ten minutes later Mortimer was having lunch with Angelo's wife. They sat close together at the table, and Mortimer was grateful to have Angelo's huge appetite to help him enjoy the food. When they finished, Mortimer sighed and relaxed in his chair. He'd never eaten like this in his life. They smiled at each other in the quiet, savory kitchen.

"Sleepy?" she said.

"A little."

"Like a little nap?" She grinned and ran her hand along his forearm.

Mortimer coughed suddenly. After all... Angelo's wife... It just wasn't proper. But it was Angelo's body.....

"I think so," he said, and smiled at her.

Later, he smoked a quiet cigarette and listened to her even breathing be-

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side him. Life was rich and rewarding for Angelo, even without the usual props of security and money, Mortimer was thinking. Angelo had a good deal....

MORTIMER suddenly felt dizzy. Something was happening to him. His mind felt light and rootless. Drifting.... He *knew* then what it was, what was happening. He was leaving Angelo.

Already his thoughts were spinning hazily. He put out a hand and touched the woman's shoulder, gratefully, in a gesture of farewell. He didn't know her name, he remembered sadly. But that didn't matter. He was going now...going...

"CHIEF, THIS thing needs action, and fast!" The voice, crisp, alert, anxious, prodded insistently into Mortimer's slumbering brain. "Chief, all hell is breaking loose."

Mortimer struggled out of a deep, heavy sleep. "W—what?" he sputtered. He shook his head like a badly battered fighter, as memories poured into his mind and organized its fluttering thoughts. Where had his peregrinating psyche landed this time? "Who am I?" he demanded, opening his eyes.

The tall, vigorous man standing before him laughed politely. "Having a little dream, eh, Chief?"

Mortimer rubbed his forehead. Be canny, he warned himself. "Yes, I guess so," he said. His new voice was vibrant with power and authority. He ran his hand over his head. Thinning hair, though, damn it. He glanced down at himself, saw an expensive suit, gold watch chain, and a body that looked spare and fit. Well, not too bad. He looked around, saw that he was in an immense office carpeted in gray, with ceiling-high windows that afforded a panoramic view of a city's skyline. There was a bar in the office, and a couch, and a secretary's desk, and a ticker-tape. It was like a Hollywood director's idea of a mogul's lair.

The man standing before him had intelligent, but harried, features and the fingers on one of his hands were tapping his trouser seam nervously.

"We've got to get into action," he said.

"Ah...yes," Mortimer said.

A woman in a smart gray suit came hurrying in with a sheaf of papers which she put before Mortimer. "Here are the lists of your companies, Mr. Colby, with approximate evaluations—"

"Evaluations," the young man cut in, "figured on the basis of fast conversion. We'll lose on every one of them."

COLBY! THAT was the only word Mortimer had understood. Colby, one of the great names of finance in the world! A man whose deals involved governments and empires, whose impact was felt from Portugal to Shanghai.

"Sir, what are we going to do?" the young man said.

"Hmmm," Mortimer said. He got to his feet, walked around the desk, rubbing his chin in what he hoped was a thoughtful manner. His image was reflected in the window pane. He thrilled at the sight of those thin, hawk-like features, the high forehead, the bold fighter's eyes that had stared at the nation from newsreels and magazines for a generation.

"Sir, you're in a spot," the young man said.

"Am I? Oh, yes, of course," Mortimer said. What was he supposed to do? What kind of spot was he in? He said cautiously, "It's bad, eh?" and watched the young man nar-

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rowly.

"Well, I think so, sir. You'll probably have no trouble coming to a decision, however."

"No, of course not." Mortimer rubbed his chin. "Supposing we review the situation, eh?"

"Yes, sir. I'd be eager to hear your analysis of it."

"Oh, but I want *yours*," Mortimer said, laughing lightly.

"Mine?"

"Yes, fresh outlook and all that, you know," Mortimer said, and waved his hand grandly.

"Well, the Bailey crowd didn't take your buying yesterday very happily," the young man said. "That's the essence of it, I suppose."

"Oh." Mortimer walked around in a small circle. "Well, now we've got the essence of it. Let's have the non-essence. The details."

"They didn't take it lying down. They're fighting back," the young man said. "If you're after copper, so is Bailey, and he's converting all his assets into fast buying power. And he's buying copper. We do the same—or we back down."

"Hmmm," Mortimer said, and went back to the desk. He picked up the papers the young lady had brought in, and glanced down at them. Real blue chips, he thought admiringly, looking at the stocks. Suddenly he found that he was perspiring. He had to sell these stocks at a loss—or do nothing. Supposing he sold them and lost—Colby lost, that is—everything? They'd send him—Mortimer—to jail. You didn't just go making grand gestures with railroads and insurance companies because you happened to get into a man's head. On the other hand, if he did nothing, he might be losing a priceless opportunity. Did he have the right to deprive Colby of this chance? Oh, it was a hell of a note.

HE STOOD up and began pacing. What would Colby do. How could he get a clue as to Colby's character?

His interoffice communication set buzzed, and the young man put down the switch. "Mrs. Colby is here to see you, sir," a cool voice said.

"Send her in, please," the young man said. He glanced worriedly at Mortimer. "I'll step outside, Chief. But we should get moving, you know. You'll pardon me, but you seem—well, like a different person today."

"I do?" Mortimer coughed. "Well, stranger things have happened. But I don't know where," he added.

Frowning, his young assistant left the office, and a moment later a tall, well-groomed woman in her late thirties came in. She was perhaps the most extravagantly beautiful creature Mortimer had ever seen. Her hair was jet-black, swept back from a pale high forehead, and her eyes were a deep, deep blue. Her head was small and arrogantly poised on the slender neck. She came toward him with a regal carriage, and the small smile on her lips was cool and indrawn. The clothes she wore might have financed a revolution in a small country. Her mink was a thing of rippling beauty, her straight black cocktail dress was a Paris inspiration, and the rhinestones in the heels of her black sandals weren't rhinestones—they were small diamonds.

"Hello, dear," she said casually. "I was in town, so I stopped to say hello. Am I interrupting anything?"

"No—nothing at all," Mortimer said hastily.

She sat on the edge of his desk, still smiling, and let one perfect slender leg swing slowly. "Cigarette?" she said.

"Oh, yes, I have some." Mortimer slapped his pockets. "No, I don't.

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Wait a minute, I'll get some."

"Oh, never mind," she said. "Please, it's not that important. Dear, I want to talk to you a minute, if you don't mind. Please don't interrupt. When we were married, I told you I was an expensive woman. Do you remember that? Well, I have been, haven't I?" She stopped smiling, and met his eyes directly. "Probably more expensive than any human being has the right to be. I know about Bailey, you see. I know you're facing an all-out fight. And I think you've changed. I've heard a whisper or two already this morning. You don't want to fight. You don't want to risk everything, as you used to, because now you've got an expensive, mink-lined millstone around your neck." She raised a slim hand. "Let me finish. You'd fight if you were alone, but you may be thinking of me. You wonder how I'd act if the money was gone. And that's made you hesitate." She stood and put both slim warm hands on his shoulders. "I'm through with my little speech now. I'll wind it up by saying I love you, more than any warehouse of minks, or any harbor of yachts. Do what you want now, dear, and tell me about it tonight. We'll have caviar or beans, depending on what happens. And either way, remember, I couldn't love you more than I do." She stood on tiptoe and kissed him warmly on the mouth. "Goodbye now, darling," she said, and walked swiftly out of the office.

"Whew!" Mortimer said.

The door opened almost immediately and the young man returned. "Well, Chief?" he said anxiously.

Mortimer smiled thinly. Now he knew what Colby would want to do. This whole body he was inhabiting was alive—pulsing from head to toe. This was a fighter's body, the body of a man who lived every day to the hilt of his energy and strength.

"Sell everything!" Mortimer snapped. "We'll show Bailey something before the day is over. I want every asset I own converted into cash—my homes, cars, everything. I've never backed down, and it's too late to learn a new way of operating. Now, get moving on this. *Fast!*"

"Yes, *sir*," the young man snapped. He scooped up the papers from the desk and left the room on a run.

Mortimer smiled and drew a deep breath. This was living! Suddenly his head buzzed warningly. The dizzyness again. He was on his way! Damn it, he thought. He'd have liked to stick around and find out how this thing would turn out. He hurried to the leather-covered divan and stretched out comfortably, smiling. Still, his next visit might be even more interesting. He closed his eyes....

A VOICE SAID, "The *Times*, Shorty."

Mortimer opened his eyes, and blinked them twice. A large young man in a dripping raincoat and snap-brim hat stood before him, holding a coin in his hand. It was late evening and crowds were hurrying past Mortimer, running to get out of the drenching rain. He stood under a leaking tarpaulin, a bundle of newspapers under his arm, a change apron tied about his ragged overcoat.

"Come on, Shorty, it's raining," the young man said goodnaturedly.

"Sure, sure," Mortimer said. He gave the man a paper from under his arm and accepted a nickel. With a sigh, he watched the young man hurry off and lose himself in the crowds.

This was a fine note, he thought indignantly. A minute ago he was selling railroads as if they were sticks of chewing gum, and now look at him—a newsie! He edged out into the rain

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and caught sight of his reflection in a drugstore window. And what a character! Small, red-faced, shoulders hunched against the cold and damp, a shadow of whiskers along his slack jowls. Mortimer ground his teeth in irritation—and then cut that out hastily. The teeth were false, and they didn't fit very well.

"*Times*, Shorty!"

"Sure, sure," he mumbled.

This customer was an older man, well dressed, with a pleasant, intelligent face. He put the paper in his pocket, and said, "No news yet on your boy, eh?"

"Well . . . no," Mortimer said, since the questioner sounded as if he anticipated a negative answer.

The man stood there, ignoring the rain, a little frown above his eyes. "Well, it's no use to say not to worry, I know. But believe me, 'Missing in Action' isn't the end of things in lots of cases. Soldiers get into tough spots, you know, cut off from their outfits, and they might take weeks getting back. You know how that is."

"Yeah, sure," Mortimer said, in his new husky voice. So he—or this newsie—had a son missing in action!

"And your boy would know how to take care of himself, I think," the man said. "He was a fine athlete, I know."

"Yeah, that's right," Mortimer said.

"Well—if there's anything I can do just say the word," the man said. He patted Mortimer's arm and walked on with the crowd.

Two or three other customers asked about the same things in the next half hour. Shorty was obviously a familiar, well-liked figure on this corner. Mortimer began to feel a new warmth for this man Shorty. He was not much on looks, or brains, perhaps, but he was respected by the people who knew him. And that was something.

IT WAS ABOUT eight o'clock when the two boys appeared. They both said "Hi," to him, and ducked in beneath the tarpaulin. They were good-looking kids, in their early teens, with frank, friendly faces. Without self-consciousness they huddled close to him to get away from the rain.

"No news yet, Shorty?" one of them said hopefully.

Mortimer shook his head.

They were both silent a moment, shifting awkwardly on their feet. Then one of them blurted out: "Shorty, we came to ask you a favor. Some of the gang said we shouldn't—because of Jimmy—but we came anyway."

"I'm glad you did," Mortimer said. "What is it?"

"Well, it's the clubhouse our dads built. We're opening it tomorrow night," one of the boys said. "And we're having a dinner."

"Yeah, our mothers all chipped in on the food," the other said.

"And we want you to come," the first one said. "We want you to come for the first night. Some of the kids thought you wouldn't want to. But we hoped you'd come. It just wouldn't seem right without you there. After the way you've helped us."

"Sure I'll come," Mortimer said. He spoke with perfect confidence; he knew that's what this Shorty would say.

"Gee, that's swell! Will you really? Thanks, thanks a million, Shorty," one of the boys said. "We'll come by tomorrow night to get you. Okay?"

"That'll be fine," Mortimer said.

The kids ducked out from the under the tarpaulin and raced down the street.

Mortimer watched them, a little smile on his face. Nice kids, decent kids. Kids like this Shorty's son had been, without a doubt. Shorty wasn't

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a happy man these days, Mortimer f... But he would still be doing what he could to keep going, keep living.

Mortimer sold three more papers before the buzzing started in his head. He sat down on a little up-ended fruit crate beside the stand, and stared at the falling rain. His eyes closed then and he went to sleep.

"LOOK, HE'S waking up, he's waking up!" a voice cried.

Mortimer was in a deep chair, and someone was fanning his face. With a pleasurable feeling of anticipation, he wondered where he was and *who* he was this time.

He opened his eyes.

"Mortimer, you're all right?" Minerva cried.

"Oh," Mortimer said. Disappointment welled up in him as he stared at Minerva's thin face, and realized that he had come back to his own timid, joyless existence. The professor was on hand too, rubbing his hands anxiously, and peering at Mortimer with near-sighted concern.

"Did it work?" he said imploringly.

"Yes...yes, it worked," Mortimer said slowly.

"I'll have the law on you," Minerva shouted to the professor. "Exposing my husband to your dangerous inventions. He's been unconscious for more than an hour."

Mortimer sat up slowly. The earplugs were still in his ears, but the machine was silent. He looked at it thoughtfully. Then he looked at Minerva. She was in command again now. Sternly, uncompromisingly, she stared at the professor. "You'll go to jail," she announced.

Mortimer looked about the antiseptically clean and hostile room. How he'd always hated those animal figurines on the coffee table! And those lamps, covered with cellophane to protect their shades. He suddenly groaned as the scenes of his life flashed in front of him like a stepped-up movie. The bank, the lifeless, desolate bank, and Minerva with her gossip, her health meals, her plans for final retirement to a boarding house in the mountains. It was all stale, all without juice.

"We thought you were dead," Minerva said to him now, in a crisp and accusing voice. "I'll have something to say to you about this ridiculous nonsense, Mortimer."

"Yes, I'm sure you will," Mortimer said.

"You gave me an awful fright. You looked just like a dead man."

"Did I?" Mortimer said. "Well, I wasn't. I was alive, Minerva, very much alive."

THAT WAS true, true as truth itself, he thought. For the first time in his life he had been alive. Through the courtesy of other human beings.

He had lived by proxy for a little while, and had learned what promise and excitement life might hold. With Angelo he had known love, and the life of a strong good man; with Colby it had been excitement, primeval, dangerous excitement, the life of a fearless, stalking animal, who asked no quarter and yielded none, and took what he wanted from the world with strong confident hands. And with poor little Shorty, what had it been? Sacrifice, pain, a humble little job. But Shorty was living, too. He'd had a son, an athlete, and Shorty had probably seen him racing past enemy tacklers on cold fall days, or sinking baskets while an excited auditorium roared his name. And Shorty had friends now. Those kids. They were his friends.

These three people, Angelo, Colby and Shorty, were living the human

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drama to the hilt. They knew love, anger, pain, sacrifice—the very stuff of life. Mortimer was the dead man, a walking dead man, waiting for the necessary formality of rigor mortis so that he could be put in a box and lowered into the ground. He wouldn't be any deader then than he was now, of course.

"Now, get that machine and yourself out of my house," Minerva snapped at the professor.

Mortimer's hand moved slowly, surely, as if it had a life of its own, and snapped on the machine.

"I'll help you," he said meekly as the buzzing began again in his ears.

He lifted the machine and, as he did so, his hand moved again, quickly, happily, and snapped down the *right* switch—the one the professor had told him was the permanent switch.

Mortimer straightened, holding the machine to his chest. The buzzing was louder, and he was already very sleepy.

He started for the door.

"Mortimer, where do you think you're going?"

Mortimer was smiling. He wasn't conscious of falling.

"I'm going—" he said, and then he struck the floor, and the machine shattered under his weight. But Mortimer wasn't conscious of this. Mortimer was gone. To take pot-luck with humanity.

THE END

IT WAS IN eastern Canada—about 950 million years ago—that the first of the Ice Age periods began. The clay beds, pebbles and boulders which it left behind today form many of the hills in northern Ontario, and are exposed by the motor road which leads from North Bay to Timagami. So miners and hunters have occasion daily to cross the remains of a glacier which lay across our earth nearly a billion years ago.

About 600 million years ago, the next glacial age began. This was at a period of uplift, when land and mountains were being formed from sea bottoms.

The third Age of Ice began in Carboniferous times—about 315 million years ago—and lasted, with interruptions, for millions of years. The glaciers from this period have been traced on every continent except Antarctica. They even entered the tropics everywhere except North America and Europe.

It was in the middle of the Coal Age that the Australian ice sheets began, advancing three times and melting in two inter-glacial epochs. The records they left behind consist of thick moraines, shales formed in glacier-fed lakes, and marine beds which contain boulders dropped by melting bergs. Limestones, sandstones and coal beds lie between these strata, and the whole series forms the thickest set of glacial and interglacial deposits known anywhere in the world.

The ancient glacial rocks of India lie within 18 degrees of the equator. Since marine beds and old moraines lie near each other, it can be deduced that the ice which produced them reached sea level.

It seems strange to reflect that the center of the African ice sheet must have been the country which today is the tropical home of elephants and chimpanzees. This sheet covered about 630,000 square miles, reaching latitude 22 degrees south, and it is certain that it moved away from the equator.

Oddly enough, it wasn't until 1901—when an Australian geologist found hardened moraines that were about 870 feet thick—that glaciers were suspected of having existed in those early times. Another moraine was discovered in the gorge of the Yangtze Kiang River in China at about the latitude of New Orleans, about three years later.

South American glaciers extended from the tropics to the modern Falkland Islands, while those of North America have been traced in Alaska and Massachusetts. A cemented moraine about 200 million years old forms the rock of Squantum Head, only a few miles from Boston.

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LOST—AND FOUND

By Calvin Clarke

SO MANY times in ages past—and today, too—scientific discoveries were made before the facts were found which proved them or made them understandable. And for this reason, so many ideas which would have advanced humanity earlier were lost, only to be discovered again later when we were mentally ready for them.

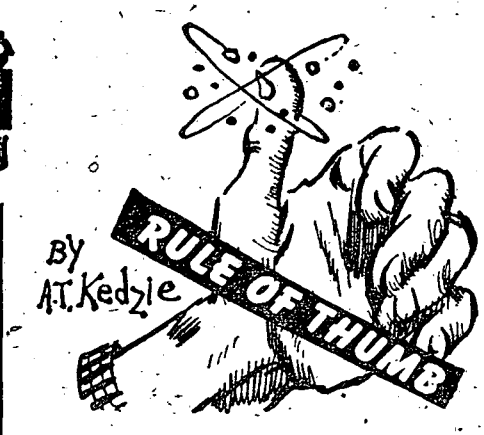
The ancient Chinese were frequently laughed at for their use of unpleasant and grotesque drugs—like the powdered toad they used to use for heart disease. That seemed to be a real superstitious relic of the Dark Age. And yet, not too many years ago, it was learned that the powdered toad contained a lot of adrenalin, the ductless-gland secretion which is a powerful drug for the heart. Which means that long before we knew anything about ductless glands, the Chinese had been sharp enough to note that there was something in a dried toad which helped to stimulate the human heart.

The safety pin—anchor of our times—was in common use among prehistoric tribes. Yet this invention was mislaid, and it wasn't until the last century that it was finally brought back into use.

The physician to King Edward the Second discovered that smallpox did not scar if the victim were in a room hung with red. Doctors of the period, and later periods, dismissed as nonsense the idea that light could affect disease, and it was dropped. The fact was rediscovered during the Civil War—here in the United States—and worked on from that time. Think how all radio-therapy might have been advanced if we had been studying the effects of light on disease during those 500 years, instead of just during the last 80 or 90 years.

During the last century, when doctors were beginning to find out about anesthetics, other doctors were studying the use of hypnotism to bring about an unconsciousness to pain and feeling for as long as required. A number of major operations were performed via hypnotism instead of anesthetic—and the results showed that fewer patients who were hypnotized died than those who were given anesthetics. This is probably because the patient's resistance to infection is not kept up under the drug, while it is when he is in a hypnotic state. But then ether and chloroform were discovered, and they drew the attention away from the hypnotic method. Recently, however, within the last few years, there has been an awakening of interest along these lines.

When the time is ripe, the idea comes full circle!



YOU NEVER mention "rule of thumb", that age-old standby of technical workers to the scientists and the professionals. It makes them shudder a little, as though it were an indecent phrase. But that's just show. Rule of thumb and intuition actually rate high in scientific work, and it would be a sad state of affairs if both weren't employed even in the most abstruse of subjects.

Consider astronomy. If any scientific field prides itself on being mathematically exact it's that ancient science. Astronomers don't move an inch without whipping out a log table, a handbook, or forty-nine volumes on theory. The boys work in a rarefied atmosphere almost as tenuous as the outer space they're anxious to probe.

But every now and then somebody comes up with a down-to-Earth, practical, concrete idea that makes the whizz-boys sit up and take notice. A recent and impressive example is the matter of locating novae.

Novae, of course, are stars which suddenly increase in brilliance like exploding bombs. When they're big enough and close enough they may be detected with the naked eye. But there are many novae visible only to telescopic analysis. This means that, ordinarily, a long and careful watch must be kept on individual stars in the hope that they'll exhibit their novae effect, if they have shown any characteristics suggestive of novae.

That slow approach to novae detection has been superseded by a remarkably simple and effective method. A practical astronomer reasoned: Why not take photographs of the same region months and months apart and then examine the photographs by laying one on top of the other, setting the plates slightly off center? And presto—it worked!

Obviously, if there had been any new novae activity, it immediately manifested itself in the form of dots on the plates of different sizes. The suspected nova could be checked then, telescopically and at once. Numerous missed novae have been turned up by this simple technique and astronomy is richer for that rule of thumb!

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Your Soul Comes C.O.D.

By L. Mack Reynolds

Norman knew just what he wanted from life. Except whom to call on for help in collecting the payoff

He hadn't even gotten all his paraphernalia out before the spirit appeared

IN VIEW of the trouble to which he had gone in order to acquire such out of the way items as a piece of unicorn horn and three drops of blood from a virgin, it was rather disconcerting to have the spirit appear even before the prescribed routine. In fact, he hadn't even got his protective pentacle drawn when he looked up to find the entity materialized in his rickety easy chair.

The spirit said, "You don't really need that, you know."

Norman Wallace stared at his visitor, even after all these months of research, unbelievingly. The other was far from what the young man expected. Somehow, he was reminded of Lincoln, his face almost beautiful in its infinite sadness.

The spirit nodded at the pentacle. "Mere superstition. It couldn't protect you if my purpose was to do you harm. But, more important still, I am quite incapable of such aggression. Man has freedom of choice, free will;

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we of the other worlds can only help him destroy—or elevate—himself, we cannot initiate."

Norman was shaken, but not quite to the point of speechlessness. He pointed to his assembled drugs, charms, potions and incenses and said, almost indignantly, "But I haven't performed the rite, as yet."

The other nodded and shrugged. "What's the difference? You wished to summon a spirit. Very well, here I am. The desire is of more importance than the act of combining those rather silly items. But, to get to the point, just what is it you desire?"

Norman Wallace took a deep breath and got down to business. He indicated his shabby quarters. "I can bear this no longer," he said. "I want a few years of decency in living, a few years of the good things of life that others enjoy. So—"

"So in your desperation you wish to sell your soul in return for help."

"That's right."

The spirit considered momentarily. "Suppose I give you my support for forty years? Suppose I guarantee you love, wealth, power, to the degree you desire them? At the end of that time your soul is mine?"

Norman Wallace's mouth tightened, but he said, "That's agreeable."

The spirit came to its feet. "Very well, the pact is made."

The other frowned. "Don't we make out a contract or something? Don't I have to sign in blood?"

The faintest of smiles came to the melancholy face of the spirit. "That won't be necessary. The pact has been made, neither of us will nor can break it."

Suddenly he had disappeared.

And almost simultaneously came a knock at the door. Dazed, Norman came to his feet and opened it.

Harriet was there and immediately in his arms. "Oh, darling, darling, I was so wrong."

He held her back, at arm's length, in amazement. "You mean that you've changed your mind, you'll marry me?"

"Oh, darling, yes. I thought going away from you, spending a few months in Florida, would let me forget. I was so wrong."

Frowning worriedly, he indicated the poverty of his room. "But Harriet, we'd still—"

She smiled now, and laughed up at him. "Remember that little farm I told you my aunt left me? The one in Louisiana?"

He nodded, uncomprehending.

"Oil, darling," she bubbled over. "Enough to give you the start you need."

AND SO it went for forty years. Wealth to the modest extent he desired it; prestige to the small degree his ambition demanded; but, most important of all, love that ripened and ever grew as the years went by. And a home rich with children, and the respect and affection of his neighbors and his associates.

Not that he had ever seen the spirit again, not in all those years. Almost, it was possible for him to look back at his life and think it was all of his own doing. Each success had seemingly been not inordinary good luck, or a result of his own efforts. Sometimes he had even tried to convince himself that the pact he'd made was a figment of his imagination, that the demon he had thought he had summoned was a result of too much worry, too much work, too little food and recreation back in those days of his poverty-stricken youth.

But subconsciously he knew. *He knew!*

And so it was that after his forty years he sat alone in his study and waited. Harriet had gone on to bed;

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the children, of course, had long since been married themselves and were living their own peaceful, happy lives.

He wondered now, as he looked back over the years, at the use to which he had put the demon's assistance. He had been promised love, wealth, and power to the extent he desired them. But, somehow, he had wanted no more than sufficient for himself and his family. He had made no attempt to accumulate the fortune of a Midas; nor, for that matter, had he attained his possessions by recourse to the racetrack or stockmarket. He had worked hard during those forty years.

He had been promised power, too. Why had he taken so little? He had been content to assume a position in society that coincided with his natural abilities. He could have been president or, for that matter, dictator of the world. Why hadn't he?

Ah, but he had taken his full measure of the other. His cup had overflowed with love. In all the years, the romance between Harriet and him had never waned. And the children? Well, for instance, the way they had returned to the old home from all over the nation this last Christmas had proven their affection.

AND NOW suddenly he thought he knew his motivation. Somewhere, beneath it all, he had been attempting to forestall the fate awaiting him. Subconsciously he had told himself that if he were moderate, if he led the good life, if he abstained from demanding the ultimate, his reckoning with the demon would be the easier.

He laughed abruptly, bitterly.

And suddenly fear washed over him. The reckoning was now.

No matter what he had done with the demonic powers awarded him. No matter how he had loved and been loved. No matter how much he repented now.

His soul was the spirit's.

He clasped his hands tightly to the arms of his chair.

Run! *Hide!* ESCAPE!

But he sank back again. There was no place to run. No place to hide. No way of escape.

The spirit materialized on the couch across from him.

Norman Wallace nodded his gray head in submission. "I was expecting you."

"Your forty years are up," the spirit told him.

"Yes, I know." Hopelessness had replaced fear now.

"Is there any reason why our pact should not be fulfilled? You are satisfied that I have suitably kept my part of the bargain?"

The old man hesitated, then nodded again. "I am satisfied."

"Then you are ready to go? You have taken farewell of those you love, made what arrangements you thought necessary?"

"Yes. Yes, I am ready." His voice was firm now. "I suppose it will be hard on Harriet for a time, but then, we must all face the end sooner or later, and only recently my doctor warned me of my heart. Harriet always said she wanted me to go first, that she would hate to think of me alone in life after we have been so close."

The spirit came to its feet. "Very well, let us be on our way."

Norman Wallace arose too and the shock was not so great as he might have expected when he was able to look back and see himself sitting there in the easy chair, his face pale and his eyes staring unseeingly.

"Then I am dead already?"

"Yes," the spirit told him, "Your doctor's diagnosis was quite accurate. Come."

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And suddenly they were in another place and Norman Wallace stared about uncomprehendingly.

He said, "It seems that in all my relations with you I have been continually surprised at the inaccuracy of the legends and myths."

"Oh?" the spirit said.

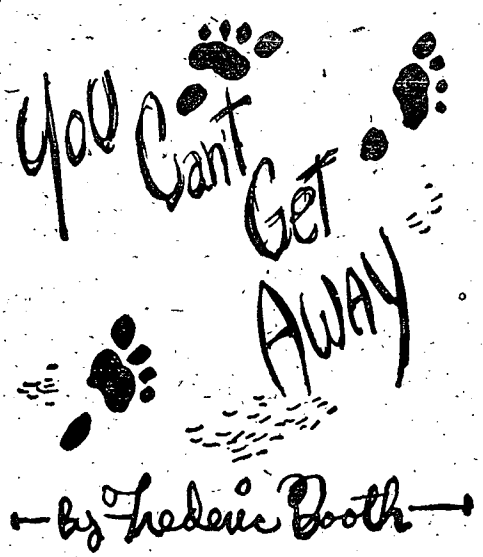
"Yes. When you first appeared you didn't look like my life-long conception of a demon. Nor in my dealings with you have you acted the way I supposed you would. Now, this place has none of the attributes I had expected of hell."

The spirit smiled. "My dear Norman, why is it that so many suppose that souls are of less interest to us than to our adversaries? Why should not one side strive for a worthy one as well as the other? I am not a demon, nor is this hell."

THE END

IN THE MUSEUM at Rutgers University are some highly prized fossils—among them the footprints of a dinosaur who, perhaps 180,000,000 years ago, must have walked along the marsh in what is now New Jersey. Its feet made deep tracks in the wet red sand, and these were later cemented into stone which, as it hardened, kept the prints forever.

A half billion years ago, jointed animals called trilobites dug for worms in what is now a shale near Lake Louise. The mud was covered by fine-grained sandstone,



which made casts of the trilobites' food holes. Other strata contain trails of crawling snails; some show scratches and pits made by scurrying crabs. Footprints of land-dwelling animals have been found in New Mexico.

Many worms and other burrowing creatures swallow sand or mud, eating the tiny animals and plants it contains. When they have all the sediment they can hold, they disgorge it in or near their burrows. Their ancestors have done that since eternity, and the disgorged castings have been museum fossils, helping us to learn the habits of these early dwellers of our land.

Coprolites, the excrement of fish, amphibians and reptiles, contain broken bits of plants, scales and bones which tell us what these ancient creatures ate. An interesting observation is that many of the reptiles and birds swallowed smoothed pebbles to help grind the food which their teeth or beaks could not chew. In New Zealand, for example, some strata are almost filled with the white quartz gizzard stones used by the moas—ancient flightless birds—while the chalk beds of Kansas contain granite pebbles that swimming reptiles swallowed near islands which now make up the Black Hills.

Fossils can be found almost anywhere. Mammoths fell into dirty ice; rhinos mired in slimy oil sand. Even peat bogs covered the bones of land dwellers during the Ice Age. Remains of ground sloths, mastodons, and other beasts have been found in a bog deposit at Big Bone Lick in Kentucky. Elephants which roamed over what is now California sank into pools of soft, sticky tar.

The dinosaur nests of Mongolia were covered by drifting sand. The Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh contains skeletons of three piglike animals which were smothered and buried by volcanic ash that fell on northwestern Nebraska. Ash, as well as large stones, form the agglomerates which killed and buried great forests in Yellowstone National Park.

Most fossils, however, were formed in water-borne sand or mud. On land, this sediment covered tracks or burrows, covered objects which ranged in size from pollen grains to dinosaurs. In the sea, it buried countless shelled creatures, as well as swimmers and floaters.

There is probably no place in this country, or the world for that matter, where fossilized remains of early life on this planet are not hidden.

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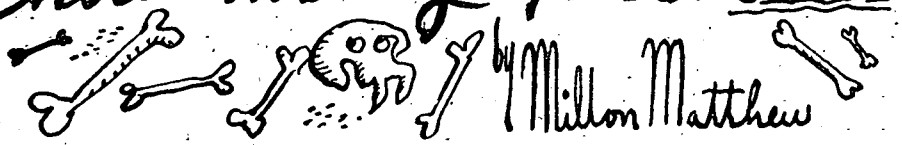
There's Variety in Fossils



by Millon Matthew

"I HATE these trips! Week after week of visiting customers in these small towns in Illinois and Iowa, driving through mile after mile of farm land. Sure—there's good money in selling machinery to the farmers, but the deadly monotony of these corn fields, oat fields, alfalfa fields. They all look alike—one's just like the other. Can't this country produce variety? Why do all farms from Maine to Kansas have to look the same?"

How many times have you heard that gripe? How often have you yourself uttered it? Why not look around as you drive, instead of speeding blindly down a road? Stop the car for a few hours—visit a limestone quarry near one of the roads you think you're so familiar with. Try splitting layers of shale in a bank, or maybe climbing some of those slopes of yellow clay. You'll see unfamiliarity all right: corals that look like stony horns, shells that seem to have come from our seas, lily-shaped creatures that are actually distantly related to the starfish. These are the remains of animals and plants that lived millions of years ago—were buried and preserved in rocks—are now part of our landscape and a record of the history of Earth.

Some of these fossils belong to species that became extinct ages ago. Others are still living, but their predecessors left remains as evidence of their existence also in an earlier age. As, for example, in Iowa, where the bones of the red fox in Ice Age strata can be found under woods where red foxes live today. On the Atlantic coast, hard-shell clams live in abundance near shores where their shells are common fossils in rocks that are ten million years old.

So look around, Mr. Traveler. There's no deadly monotony of landscape anywhere in the world—if you know how to look, and what to look for.

Beware the Drifting Sand

by June Burie

AMONG THE MATERIALS which made up Earth when it was first formed were that which came directly from the Sun, that which fell onto the surface of the planet, and that which poured out after millions of years as lava and volcanic cinders.

But then a new sort of rock was formed when the upheavals subsided and waters appeared. Rains fell on the cinders and lava, rivulets carried the dust downhill and streams took it to where oceans had begun to grow. There the currents stopped, dropping their loads, which settled into layers of mud. Those layers were the first sedimentary rocks.

The rains also dissolved minerals in the dust and cinders. These were helped by the carbon dioxide which the volcanoes had produced in large amounts and which water gathered up as it fell. The gases combined readily with the minerals to change the ash and solid lavas. Sunshine and cooling, gravity and frost—and solid stones began to break into blocks and granules.

New rocks were built, were erupted, were lifted into the land, and were exposed to the same forces which had shaped their predecessors. And so the processes of weathering go on, even today. In the early days of the planet, when the lands were high, they changed swiftly; when they lay near sea level, slowly.

And as we go about the business of living in these complicated times—as we worry about the possibility of being destroyed by a single blast of the hydrogen bomb, or perhaps an even deadlier weapon—we give no thought to the land which is changing shape even as we walk upon it. Until one day we may find that nature has used her own weapon—didn't wait for a manufactured one to bring a violent change.

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THE MASTER KEY

By

Frances M. Deegan

Dan did fine knocking out the Venusian renegades. Until the day he found he was one of their leaders

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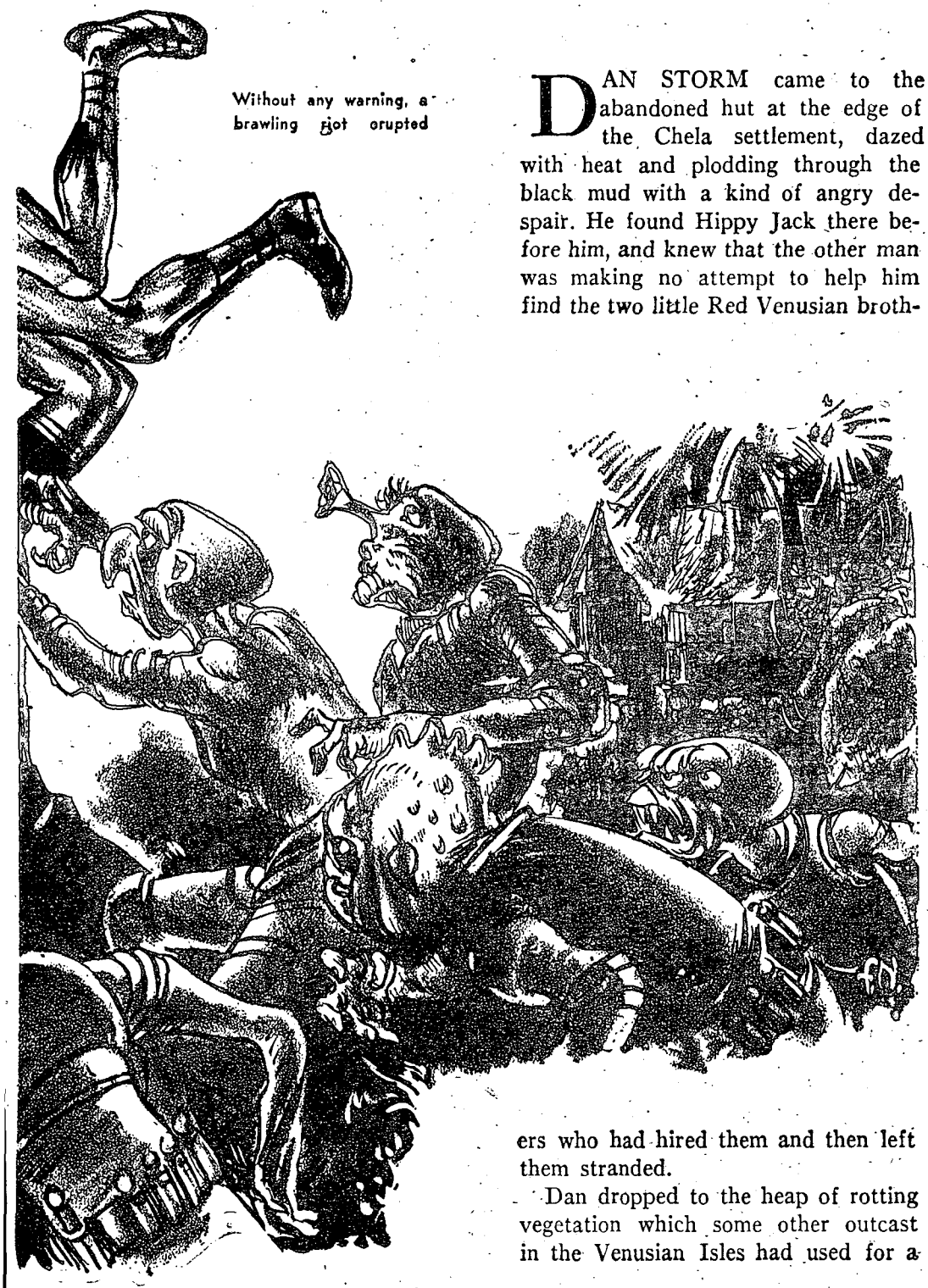

Without any warning, a brawling riot erupted

DAN STORM came to the abandoned hut at the edge of the Chela settlement, dazed with heat and plodding through the black mud with a kind of angry despair. He found Hippy Jack there before him, and knew that the other man was making no attempt to help him find the two little Red Venusian brothers who had hired them and then left them stranded.

Dan dropped to the heap of rotting vegetation which some other outcast in the Venusian Isles had used for a

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bed. He sat hunched in steamy discomfort, pulling at the gray knit fabric of his uniform where it was plastered to his muscular body.

"I hope you're not trailing a guard detachment," Hippy said. He lay flat on his back with both arms propping his head, watching Dan with a hard fixed stare.

"We can't keep up this hole and corner game," Dan growled. "We'll never find the Kvi brothers if we have to keep dodging the guard."

"I told you," Hippy drawled, scarcely moving his flat lips, "we can hide out indefinitely on Renegade Row."

"Every frontier settlement in the Universe has its Renegade Row," Dan said angrily. "But as many times as I've been stranded before, I've never yet had to join that brotherhood of thieves and thugs."

"If the Government guards pick us up, it means the labor battalion."

"Not if we can prove that we're still employed. The Kvi brothers are honorable Red Venusians; they wouldn't abandon a couple of employees without even paying for their services."

"Those red monkeys ran out on us. We're no longer employed, and we'll never see any of our back pay."

"They seemed to think they could raise some credit at the settlement here on Chela Island. They were going to see Max Mill, the Governor of the Interplanetary Trade Corporation."

"Why would a high and mighty Master Force like the Interplanetary Trade Corporation hand out credit to a couple of native prospectors?" Hippy asked harshly. "Our expedition was a failure. We didn't find that rich bed of hairweed we were looking for, did we?"

Dan said nothing, and Hippy went on in a hard flat voice: "I hope you're not holding out on me, Storm. If you did find something, I have a right to know about it. Instead of looking for those two little red apes, we could raise some credit ourselves. We could sell the information and go into business as independent prospectors. But not for that tricky hairweed. I'd go for the jewels on the lower islands."

"The risk is about equal," Dan said quickly, hoping to divert the other man's attention from the possibility that the Kvi brothers had made a discovery without his knowledge. "Your jewels might turn out to be inferior, but once you find a bed of hairweed, it's worth all the trouble of fishing it up. The demand for hairweed textiles must be tremendous. Think of owning a robe or a blanket with miraculous healing powers. Magnetic therapy in a fabric. It draws all the weariness out of the human body, and all the poisons that affect the nervous system of civilized man. It eases his aches and pains and produces restful sleep. Think of it!"

"Ah, that's just another Earth fad for the suckers."

"THE TEXTILE has the approval of the Science Commission. All they need is a supply of the stuff. A single robe costs as much as $10,000, depending on the percentage of hairweed woven into it. And a ton of the raw stuff is worth half a million Earth dollars—delivered."

"A dirty job, and nasty stuff to handle. I'd rather have a pocketful of rose diamonds."

"You're talking about a pocketful of rosy dreams. Messer Klon has a corner on all the valuable diamond sources."

"That old fogy! He's a myth. A half-man. A superstition. I've been on Mars, and I know that Martian females can't give birth to a man. That's what he claims to be—half man and

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half Martian. There's no such thing. You certainly don't believe all that nonsense."

"I don't know how much of it is nonsense, but there is plenty of solid fact. He was already well established in the Islands long before the Government Post was built. He holds undisputed possession of the Southeast Islands, and lives like a potentate on his private island estate. The Federated Government believed in him to the extent of drawing up a formal treaty, which recognizes him as a sovereign power. That's no myth."

"Oh, he's there all right. And the Government does business with him. But no fake half-man could bluff me out of making a try for—"

Hippy swore softly as feet plodded through the mud outside. "I knew you'd bring the guard after us."

There were two of them. They came into the shack and poked lazily at the heap of moldering vegetation with their clubs.

"Come along," one of them said in a bored voice.

Dan got up wearily. "We're employed," he said. "Our employers, the Red Venusian Kvi brothers, have temporarily disappeared. We're looking for them."

"No good," the guard grinned. "You're unattached or you wouldn't be hiding out here. If you don't want to come peaceably, we'll call the full detachment, and rub your nose in the mud...."

FOUR EARTH hours later, Dan Storm rolled over on a narrow rope cot and dropped his booted feet to the floor. His dark face was flushed and his eyes were puffed with sleep. On the next cot Hippy Jack was once more stretched flat on his back. His tough face was emotionless and his round blue eyes were glassy, like the nerveless waiting of a cat.

They were surrounded by long rows of empty cots, and by the stale smell of the men who had occupied them. The continuous half-daylight which prevailed in the Venusian Isles gave the place a murky gloom. In spite of the uncovered portholes near the ceiling the air was stifling, and to make it worse a three-foot dragonfly blundered through a porthole exuding his sickly odor. Hippy began to curse rhythmically as the monster insect sailed from one end of the low building to the other, effectively spreading his obnoxious odor, and finally blundering out again on the opposite side.

Hippy turned his cat-still stare back to Dan. "I hope you're satisfied," he said flatly. "You'll soon be an honorable member of the labor battalion, sweating your guts out on the docks."

"You didn't have to stick with me," Dan said, his deep voice husky with sleep. "You could have left me and joined the Renegades long before the guard caught up with us."

"Not without you. As soon as the guards picked you up, they'd be looking for me. I don't trust you any more than you trust me. We could have handled those two dumb guards."

Dan shook his head and wiped the stinging sweat out of his eyes. "Unless we killed them on the spot, we'd have the whole garrison after us."

"You're too soft for this game, Storm. What gets me is how a man with your education and training ever got into it."

"Maybe I was tired of being civilized," Dan said bitterly. "But I can't see that killing those guards would have helped our situation enough to warrant the killing."

It had been useless to argue with the guard. "Tell it to Captain Cherny," the guard had yawned, and tickled Dan's ribs with his club. But

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it was unlikely that the Commander of the Federated Government Post would be any more impressed with their story than the guard had been. Much labor was needed to handle the Government shipments of treasure, and all of it was recruited from the mixed races who sought their fortune in the fabulous Isles of Venus.

"Captain Cherny doesn't seem to be in a hurry to look us over," Dan said moodily. "Those lazy guards may have forgotten to report us."

"Or maybe he's building up a case to prove we murdered our employers," Hippy said flatly.

"He wouldn't have any reason to think so, would he?"

"Now, why would I want to see the little red apes scragged?" Hippy drawled. "If the expedition was a failure, and they came back here busted, what would I gain by knocking them off?"

"Maybe you think they did discover a rich bed of hairweed."

"Did they?" Hippy snapped.

"If they did," Dan replied coldly, "they evidently meant to keep it a secret. Possibly they don't trust Earthmen."

"We won't argue about it," Hippy said softly. "Not just yet. But I've got an idea that soon—"

HIPPY broke off to stare as a scrawny Earthman came toward their row of cots on shuffling feet. He was fully covered with the gray porous knit uniform which Earthmen wore in the Islands to protect their skin from the irritations of climate and insects, but his frail physique was apparent in the baggy sections of the once close-fitting apparel.

"Sweet mother of insects!" Hippy rasped. "Is that a laborer?"

"If he is," Dan growled, "he must have come in on sick leave."

Obviously, this desiccated specimen was in no condition to work on the steaming docks, loading the Government transports. And the more time a laborer lost, the longer it would take to work his way free.

"There's a picture of our future," Hippy said with soft savagery. "Once you're hooked on this labor battalion, you'll never get off it alive."

"This is no laborer," Dan said thoughtfully as the man came closer. "He couldn't lift a bale of straw. He's here for some other purpose, and it may be a trick."

The scrawny little man stopped at the foot of Hippy's cot, breathing with a thin wheezing noise. "I do mending and repairing," he announced huskily. "For a small fee. The clerk will deduct it from your earned credits. I also do a little doctoring for the men on sick leave."

"We don't happen to be on sick leave—yet," Dan said. "We're not even registered. You can't do a thing for us."

"Max Mill sent me," the little man whispered.

Dan glanced up at him with sharp suspicion. As Governor of the Interplanetary Trade Corporation, Max Mill exercised a powerful influence in the Islands, second only to the mysterious Messer Klon. It was well known that unofficially his authority exceeded that of Captain Cherny, the Government representative. It did not seem possible that this bedraggled little man could have come from the mighty Max Mill. But Dan decided to play along.

"So?" he said softly.

"Max Mill will employ you both as experienced mechanics at top credit rating," the man recited tonelessly, as if repeating a memorized speech.

Dan looked across at his companion. Hippy Jack still lay flat on

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his back, arms behind his head, with that fixed cat stare focused on the messenger.

The messenger waited. He had nothing more to say.

"All right." Dan held out his hand.

To his surprise, a clawlike hand met it and put two identification tags into it. The little man shuffled away without having shown the slightest interest in his errand. But the tags were genuine, molded of expensive duraline and engraved with the ITC insignia of a rocket in flight.

SOLD, DAN thought grimly, to the highest bidder. The little man had carefully told them he was a patcher of clothes and bodies for the laborers, so that they could give the right answer if they were questioned.

He tossed one tag and it landed on Hippy's chest, riding the slow lift and fall of his breathing. Dan examined the other, dangling it from the black cord and reading the inscription: "Interplanetary Trade Corporation—Master Mechanic—Credit Number H2-43X EVMA."

The last code letters surprised him, because they gave the identity tag a universal value, meaning Earth, Venus, Mars and Asteroids, and by implication, any other part of the Universe where the ITC influence might reach. Identity tags issued by the Government were good only in the spot where they were issued.

Dan stared at his tag with the morose feeling that he had just bitten on a clever snare. He didn't feel the hook yet, but he was sure it was there.

"What's the matter with it?" Hippy asked flatly.

The strong line of Dan's black eyebrows lifted and he met the pale stare of his companion with dark irony. "From a rating of minus zero," he said dryly, "we have now jumped to Master rating, Universal scale."

"That's good." Hippy put a slight emphasis on "good", and brought himself lazily to a sitting posture, catching his disk in a thick palm and slipping the cord over his head.

"Surprisingly good, isn't it?" Dan mused, turning the disk in long fingers. "Mechanics aren't that scarce in these parts. No metal machinery can be operated in this climate, and almost any Earthman can qualify as a mechanic on the primitive equipment now being used."

"Almost, yeah. But not every Earthman has our combined brains and talent. If they had, they'd know better than to get stranded in this steam hole. We lost a gamble, but it doesn't happen to men in our class very often. Max Mill is smart enough to know that."

Dan's thought went further, but he did not voice it. Max Mill would also be smart enough to know that only men with a past history of failure would have taken a chance on the Kvi brothers' expedition. Earthmen who hired out to red Venusians did so only because they had been reduced to desperate straits. And desperate men could be used on dangerous business. That the powerful Interplanetary Trade Corporation might have occasion to resort to illicit measures in the pursuit of trade was a foregone conclusion. Even the Government representatives sometimes had to use extra-legal measures at the far flung outposts in order to promote Government interests.

"Max Mill may be smart enough to recognize our value as hired hands," Dan grinned. "But on the other hand he may have such an exaggerated opinion of our combined brains and talent that he wants to get rid of us before we can start competing with

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the mighty ITC."

"THAT'S SUPPOSED to be funny, I guess," Hippy growled. "But it's a mistake to underestimate yourself. The trouble with you is you never really let yourself go, Storm. You're always holding back. You really could give the ITC some competition if you ever turned yourself loose. You're not yellow, but you've got a weak spot in you somewhere."

"You haven't got a weak spot!" Dan suggested irritably, stung by the hint of truth in the hard words.

"Nope. No weak spots. With me it's lack of education. I never had your advantages. I can handle myself and deal with any situation up to a point, and then it gets beyond me. If I had your knowledge and training," his flat voice sharpened with resentment, "I'd be right up there with the Master Forces! I'd be one of the Powers, with my own corporation, juggling planets and making the laws. Instead of rotting in this stinking steam-hole like an animal."

"Maybe you think we'd make a good team," Dan said moodily. "And maybe you're right. Except for the fact that we don't like each other."

"We don't have to like each other," Hippy said coldly. "The purpose would be battle, not brotherhood. We can buy brothers—and sisters, too—after we win our battles for wealth and power."

"After we put the ITC and one or two other Master Forces out of the way," Dan gibed. "And providing, of course, that we didn't put each other out of the way in the process."

"A calculated risk," Hippy murmured. "Which would prevent either of us from ever becoming careless, or—"

A uniformed guard slouched in from the front regions, scratching himself gently. "Registration," he called indolently. "All new applicants report for registration."

Dan got up at once, stamping his feet and patting himself to dislodge the small red pinheads which collected on man and beast. The tiny insects were only mildly irritating to living flesh, but they had a grisly purpose in attaching themselves to a body. They were waiting for it to die and decay in order that they might feed and multiply in the rotting carcass.

"Master Mechanics will at least be able to afford daily delousing," Dan muttered.

"Among other luxuries we have been missing," Hippy drawled. "The ITC also imports food and drink fit for humans. And I haven't touched a female in so long that..."

He brushed at himself carelessly and followed Dan to the front of the building, walking lightly in the characteristic prowl of a fighter always alert to danger. In contrast to Dan's erect, almost arrogant stride, Hippy moved like a wary animal, dogging Dan's heels with relentless purpose.

THE INDOLENT guard was sprawled at a desk, checking work reports, and indicated an inner office with a limp arm. "Inside," he mumbled.

In a large bare room Commander Cherny was also seated at a desk, but appeared to be more alert than his heat-bogged aide. A native four-legged Droon sat at the far side of the room, working a treadle fan with tireless limbs. The squat, saffron-skinned natives of the Isles were primitives of low intelligence, but could be trained to do simple tasks by an Earthman with patience and the ability to win their confidence. The square mat, woven of long, flat

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liga leaves, swung to and fro from the ceiling wafting the sharp odor of disinfectant with which it was impregnated, and giving the illusion of a fresh breeze.

Cherny was long and lean almost to the point of emaciation. His thin, dark face was sharpened with self-discipline, intelligent without being ascetic. His large brown eyes were calm and confident.

Dan stared at this man with a puzzled frown. The obvious lack of discipline at the post, and the fact that Max Mill's man was free to come and go, snatching laborers right under the Government's nose, had led him to expect the usual sloppy, fat-headed commander of a remote outpost. In this man Dan recognized a trained administrator, in full control of himself, and far superior to the requirements of a primitive frontier.

Cherny examined each of them with the cool deliberation of authority before speaking. He glanced at the papers on his desk, and said: "Hippy . . . Jack . . ."

"Yes!" Hippy snapped at the slow enunciation of his name.

The captain glanced up casually. "Is that your right name?"

"Right. Old national." There was a swagger of pride in Hippy's hard voice. "In the ancient tongue, the name was Hippolyte Jacques."

"Was what?"

Hippy spelled it for him with careful insolence.

"Oh, yes." Cherny ignored the insolent tone. "Interesting how the ancient names survive. And Dan Storm. That's an ancient name too, isn't it?"

"Probably," Dan said.

"Probably. Then you don't claim connection with the illustrious Storm-Victor family?"

"I'm afraid not."

The Captain's idle gaze went over him once more, and caught the flicker of anger in Dan's eyes.

"Well." Cherny straightened in his chair and put his slender hands flat on the papers which were stirring under the fan. "Two fine specimens—for space bums. We don't often get choice material for the battalion. However, your past records are not in your favor, even in the labor battalion. Instability breeds discontent, and therefore I feel obliged to warn you that any and all irregularities are subject to fines. You know what that means?"

HIPPY SWORE at him brazenly, and Dan said quickly: "I'm sorry, Captain. We should have explained at once that we are not eligible for the battalion."

He stepped closer and opened his hand to show the identity disk. Cherny gazed at it silently, letting the muscles in his suddenly taut face relax with calm control.

"Then why did you come here?" he inquired.

"We needed a place to sleep, and the ITC was not prepared to provide it." Dan's voice nearly stammered over the flimsy excuse. "We came here in order to stay out of trouble."

"That's unusual," the captain murmured, making no attempt to point out the obvious flaws in the false statement. "Max usually takes better care of his recruits. Show your disk, Jack. Thank you." He gathered the two sets of papers neatly, and handed them across the desk. "Joe will return your kits as you leave. That's all, Earthmen."

Dan left the long stone barracks with a sense of having come off second best in the encounter with Captain Cherny. Hippy Jack evidently felt it, too. He expressed his innate resent-

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ment of superiors with a last vindictive curse as they stepped out into the vaporous half-day.

"He could have stopped us," Dan said. "He knew very well these disks were slipped to us after we reported to the post."

"That smart stick!" Hippy growled. "He probably arranged it, and then took advantage of the situation to insult us. Specimens—space bums!"

"He didn't arrange it," Dan said. "He was very much surprised when he saw the identity tag. He hadn't been expecting Max Mill to make a grab for us, and the discovery was an unpleasant surprise. He didn't like it, but still he made no attempt to stop us. I wonder why?"

"Ah! You and your psychology," Hippy jeered. "That's one of the handicaps of your education. You have to stop and analyze every forked flitch you meet. What does it get you?"

"Nothing," Dan admitted sourly, and grimaced at the stinking black muck of the roadway, which was as unchanging as the moist gloom overhead. Across the road the unreclaimed marsh land was overgrown with gray razor-sharp blades of swamp cane, which merged with the mist and became a blurred curtain of unknown depth, a dim nothingness.

"But you can't blame it on education," Dan added bitterly. "Call it a curse of temperament. I'm always reaching for the stars and getting stuck in the mud. I have a feeling that Max Mill has some dirty business in view for a couple of space bums, and we're elected."

"You're the one who accepted the tags," Hippy reminded him.

"I'm not complaining," Dan growled. But it was not true. Something inside him was complaining, softly and bitterly.

He had made a wrong choice. Again. He knew it. He had sensed it even as he accepted the tags, but the disapproval in the captain's abrupt dismissal had convinced him.

CHERNY WAS a man no older than himself, who stuck to a tough job and kept himself under control no matter where the job took him. In time young Captain Cherny would become a powerful executive in the Colonial Government. He was obeying all the rules which Dan violated with reckless persistence. Because the wild devil of impatience in Dan Storm would not submit to the long, grueling grind of the career road, he squandered his forces in ill-starred leaps at the big chance, falling back each time into the mud of oblivion.

Hippy let him lead the way, and he stepped cautiously along the rickety walk which ran at one side of the swampy road, and on which more of the dreary stone Government buildings fronted. Layers of rubbery ferns and cane stalks had been laid on poles sunk in the mire, and in places the walk sagged and disappeared in the mud. The whole structure swayed under a man's weight and the tough vegetation gave under his feet as if it bore him unwillingly.

There was a dream Dan Storm had had many times in many places. In the dream he was crossing a rickety, rotten bridge. There were gaping holes and loose timbers, and the whole thing quivered with uncertainty. Sometimes there was a swirling black torrent beneath. And again there was something worse.... Sometimes there was nothing at all, blank, terrifying nothingness for a man to fall into. At times he crouched sweating and shivering with tension on the bridge, but he never did quite fall. He always woke

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with the dream sharp in his memory like a warning omen.

He knew that the dream was a product of his tormented subconscious, but he could not control the dream while his conscious life was in a state of turmoil and uncertainty. So long as he continued to make the wrong choice, he knew that the ominous dream would haunt him.

It was haunting him now as he made his way along the crazy walk, regretting his hasty acceptance of the suspiciously opportune offer from Max Mill. If he had refused the ITC identity tag—if he had shown a willingness to obey the rules and submit to hard labor to win his freedom—a man like Cherny might be capable of showing his approval in any number of ways. He might be of considerable help to a stranded Earthman whose knowledge and training were equal, if not superior, to his own.

But how could he have known that Cherny would be an intelligent administrator? He had expected to find a slovenly brute....

BEYOND THE last of the Government buildings the walk vanished in one of the numerous mudholes where the swamp had swallowed the makeshift construction. Dan jumped angrily across the odorous slime of rotting vegetation, and a cloud of transparent insects swarmed up around him. He beat them off and kept going, brushing at his face and ears repeatedly with quick disgust. Hippy landed lightly behind him and came through the swarm spitting and snorting, and cursing the ten thousand forms of insect life which thrived in the fetid murk of the Isles.

They passed a row of native huts on stilts, where naked offspring of the four-legged Droons clambered like sturdy centipedes, and the walk curved with the road and came into the main section of the port settlement. A jumble of squalid cabins and temporary shelters sprawled in disorder around the larger stone buildings. The main roadway to the docks was paved with stone, but a deep layer of mud covered the stones, and rotting refuse gave off an overpowering odor of stagnation.

Here there was a sluggish kind of activity, and tall Earthmen in the inevitable gray knit uniform and stout plastic boots, mingled with gliding Greenos from Mars, whose green-blooded reptilian bodies withstood both climate and insects without protection. Squat yellow Droon quadrupeds moved crab-wise through the mud, leaving a crooked trail, and small Red Venusians rolled along on their short legs, sometimes aided by their long arms.

Without any warning a brawling riot erupted from a ramshackle cabin as the two Earthmen were passing, and they were instantly embroiled in a senseless battle of flying fists and grunting, straining bodies.

It was fight, or go down under the disorganized fury of the free-for-all. The seven rioters were all Earthmen, battered roughnecks whose free style fighting was like no other kind of combat anywhere in the Universe. Although taken by surprise, Dan and Hippy were combatwise veterans of the same school, and they fought side by side, backing inch by careful inch out of the melee.

At once the battle began to take on form and purpose, seven against two, as all the rioters turned their attack against the coordinated defense of the two outsiders. Dan took a stinging blow on the side of his head and grappled with a burly roughneck as their feet slid under them in the greasy mud. A wiry ape tried to fasten him-

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self on Dan's back, reaching for a hold around his neck and delivering short jabbing punches at his kidneys.

Dan turned his head and had a flash glimpse of Hippy sparring swiftly with a gaunt, hook-nosed giant and driving a knockout blow with deadly suddenness and with such force that his whole body seemed to leap with it. Dan grasped the burly opponent who was trying to thrust him off balance, and leaning his weight to get leverage, twisted sideways, bouncing the wiry ape with his hip and throwing him clear off his feet. The burly tough bellowed as one foot slipped between Dan's braced legs. He went down, pulling Dan with him into the slimy muck that was churning and leaping under the furious activity as if it were alive.

AND SUDDENLY it was over. A sergeant and six guards from the garrison fell on them with clubs, and Dan took a numbing blow on one shoulder before he could back up against the rough wall of the cabin and indicate peaceful submission.

There was nothing slovenly about the sergeant. He moved fast and barked rapid-fire orders. And his men were tough and efficient and got the whole muddy mess straightened out and lined up within seconds. Dan and Hippy promptly displayed their identity tags, and their explanation was as promptly accepted with a gleam of respect.

"These bums from Renegade Row!" the sergeant growled. "This is the second time they've tried to start a riot in this watch. They tried it once before down on the docks, and we've doubled the patrols. Don't know what's got into them, but it gives us a chance to clean them up. These youngsters will go into the workhouse for a good long spell."

The muddy, battered renegades were being roped together, neck by neck, and were marched off by the club swinging guards. The gaunt hook-nosed giant had recovered from Hippy's knockout blow; and turned a look of fury at them. "You dirty, double-dealing blaster!" he shouted hoarsely. "You'll pay for this, you—"

He was silenced by a club, and the whole hang-dog chain of men plodded doggedly through the black ooze, headed for the wretched discomfort of the workhouse.

Dan shook the mud off his hands and scraped some of the worst of it off his arms and legs. He looked at Hippy who was staring after the prisoners with that still cat stare which revealed nothing. Dan turned without a word and continued toward the big gray stone ITC building. Hippy prowled along behind him silently. And in silence, Earthmen and aliens alike watched them from a careful distance.

A wooden ramp led to the arched entrance of the solid square ITC building. They showed their identity tags at a latticed window and were admitted through a heavy wooden gate to an inner courtyard. The huge building was a two-story hollow square, built around the stone paved courtyard. The inner walls of the building had been painted white and the whole place was wonderfully clean and dry. A mild-mannered guard with a long, thoughtful face showed no surprise at their condition, but conducted them immediately to a lower chamber where they scrubbed and disinfected themselves and their clothes, and emerged looking somewhat more presentable.

The same guard conducted them to a long mess hall and brought them a light meal of Earth bread and cheese and Venusian plums, and a dry wine which was mildly stimulating. They

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confined their conversation to idle comments, even after the guard had left them. Each was aware of a certain tension in their relationship. They were unsure of each other, and of what lay before them, but each in his own way tried to conceal the uncertainty. Dan had the unpleasant conviction that the meaningless riot had coincided too perfectly with their arrival at that exact spot. But he preferred to keep the conviction to himself.

THE GUARD came back at last with the information that Max Mill was ready to talk to them, and they returned to the courtyard and crossed to the opposite side. The square entrance hall had a tile floor and cane chairs, and there was a lean, weatherbeaten ship's captain waiting there; but they were taken directly upstairs to Max Mill's sumptuously furnished apartments. The guard left them in a small sitting room which might have been transported intact from the home of an Earth millionaire.

It was coolly furnished in green and white, with a pale green carpet and white furniture, and soft deep chairs upholstered in harmonious shades of green. A dainty white desk gave the room a feminine air, wholly inappropriate to the business of the big ITC. Hippy snorted expressively, and they both remained standing.

A white door opened in the far wall and Max Mill stood there smiling. The Governor of the ITC was a round, chunky man with merry brown eyes. His eyes seemed to be swimming in the juices of perpetual laughter, and his short, flaring nose and small mouth over a rounded chin gave him the look of a genial goblin. He was wearing sandals and a loose white robe, and as he closed the white door behind him, tinkling feminine laughter floated out, and there were fleshy sounds of gentle slapping.

"Sit down, Earthmen," he chuckled. "Don't bother to thank me for the last minute rescue. I'm sure I can use you somewhere, eh?" He seated himself comfortably in a round chair. "Tell me, what happened to your employers, the little Kvi brothers, after they left here?"

"I didn't know they had been here," Dan said. He sank into a soft chair and a faint fragrance drifted up around him.

"Oh, yes. They thought the ITC would advance credit. They claimed to have spotted an untouched bed of hairweed, but they were unwilling or unable to reveal the location. The ITC is generous, but not charitable enough to finance vague hopes. I had to refuse them of course. Did they spot a rich growth?"

"If they did, it was a secret," Dan said indifferently. "Did you know about it, Hippy?"

"Nope. It's news to me."

"Ah." Max Mill chuckled softly. "And I almost believed them. If you could have given me any assurance at all that it was true, I might still be willing to advance sufficient credit. Except, of course, that the poor little Kvi brothers seem to have disappeared. I wonder..." He poked at his round chin, kneading it like soft dough. His brown eyes were brimming with mirth. "When they left here, they were going to try Messer Klon's agent—that dour Earthman, Smith Han. You know him?"

"Only by reputation," Dan murmured.

"He has a mean reputation." Max Mill almost laughed. "A regular fleecer, and very tough. Well, no wonder. He's got all the power of his master behind him. He can get away with—" A pudgy hand waved and

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the short fingers flicked at the air. "You know? I just wonder now if something unpleasant happened to the innocent little Kvi brothers who thought they could find a rich bed of hairweed. Hideous joke on them, eh?"

"They vanished all right," Hippy said flatly. "We couldn't find a trace of them."

"THAT GIVES me a thought." Max Mill cocked his head roguishly. "I'd like to know. I'd really like to know what happened to them. Smith Han has been getting away with—" The fingers flicked again. "A little too much. If I could prove a case of abduction or outright extermination, it would make me awfully happy. A jolly business, eh? What do you say? Shall we take it on?"

"Why not?" Dan said affably. "Since that's what you got us here for?"

"Oh, now you're being clever," Max Mill said reprovingly. "I may have had some such idea in the back of my head, but it only just now came out. Still, it's a good idea, and I'm going to follow it up. I don't really need your help, you know. You don't even have to stay here if you don't want to. Captain Krone is sitting downstairs now, waiting for sailing orders. You can go back with him to the main continent, and ship out for Saturn. The ITC needs men at the new post. I'm sure you can both pass the test for Master Mechanics, on my recommendation. How about it, eh?"

"Thanks. I'll stay here," Dan murmured. "Why exchange one hell for a worse one?"

"Ha-ha. That's a good one. That's a good answer. How about you, Hippy Jack?"

"I'll stick."

"Good. Oh, that's fine." He chortled mischievously. "You're a pair after my own temper. I can get all the men I want, you know. Any number of men, but such mediocrities, such limited laggards. My word! Now you take that guard who brought you here. That Eggerts, who looks so studious and—and intellectual. Wouldn't you take him for a bright lad? Wouldn't you, now?" He waved both pudgy hands and went on without waiting for an answer. "Not a brain in his head. His skull is as empty as a dry bela nut. Shake him out of his routine, and shove him into a strange situation, and he's lost. He'll wait for somebody to tell him what to do. And that's what I get. You know? Wonderfully educated fellows. They pass all the tests. They're educated to death. All the fervor, and imagination, and inherited hellishness is educated out of them. They're amusing, but not very exciting. I'm counting on you two to liven things up a bit. You've had some experience, eh?"

"Some," Dan said.

"You want to look at our papers?" Hippy asked dryly.

"No. No, I don't bother with such details. The Captain of the Guard will take charge of your papers and set up your records and so forth. You'll be on the ITC rolls as Master Mechanics with a credit of $1,000 a month. That's the standard ITC rating for a Master Mech. But you won't be subject to the rest of the routine. You will be accountable only to me, and such bonuses as I may choose to hand out will not appear on the records at all. I can afford to be generous if you—heh-heh, if you come up to expectations. You want to gamble with me?"

"With pleasure," Dan said.

"I'll go for it," Hippy seconded.

"Good—good!" Soft laughter burst out of him. "Here's the first play. I'm

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betting each of you $5,000 you can't prove that Smith Han caused the little red Kvi brothers to vanish. If you prove it within a reasonable time, I'll be delighted to pay off. Now, you see how it goes? You like the game?"

"Very much," Dan said.

"When do we start?" Hippy asked flatly.

"OH, NO HURRY. No immediate rush." The mischievous chortle ran around the room again like a tantalizing girl. "I know you've heard about the generous provisions the ITC makes for the welfare of its trusted employees. I'm sure you're looking forward to some of the unusual privileges and so forth. I know you've been through a bad time and need a little relaxation. You know? Well, you've come to the right place for it. But first, let's settle the details on this bet—the Smith Han bet, eh? What's your first thought?"

"It will be strictly confidential," Dan said. "I hope."

"Oh, by all means. That goes without saying. For your sakes as well as for mine. I want proof that Smith Han deliberately did away with the two little red Kvi brothers in order to get hold of that rich bed of hairweed which they claimed to have discovered. I won't question your methods. What you get, and how you get it, will be your own business. But the proof must be of such a nature that I can present it to the Federated Government to show that Messer Klon, or his agents, have violated the provisions of the treaty. You know about the treaty?"

"We've heard of it," Dan said. "It recognizes Messer Klon's rights to the Southeast Islands, and provides at the same time certain restrictions intended to prevent him from interfering with the free exploitation of all the rest of the island territory."

"Very good." Max Mill made a comical face by puffing out his round cheeks. "You're practically a diplomat. So. You get the point. The treaty is violated, and I have the inestimable pleasure of proving it. Much to Messer Klon's dismay. The poor old dodo may not even know that his precious treaty is being violated. You know? His agents are tricky rascals, and he never leaves his island. He may be a senile wreck by this time, for all we know. It's high time somebody checked up on the situation." He winked roguishly. "That rich little empire should not be allowed to fall into the wrong hands, eh? Now, there's a thought to carry away with you. A nice juicy thought. But I'm running away with myself. Have you any other questions?"

"How long has Captain Cherny been in command of the Chela Post?" Dan asked.

Max Mill's cupid mouth was pushed out in a small "o" and his dancing brown eyes were still for a moment with shrewd speculation.

"An excellent fellow," he said blandly. "Ambitious, too. This is his first season down here, and he is still imbued with all the ideals of the Government Administration School. You know? He's making a fine show of cleaning up the post and enforcing regulations, and so forth. But it won't last. That first fine frenzy wears off after a time. No Government outpost can be maintained according to strict regulations. And here in the islands, it's impossible. Climate and conditions are all against it. The men go to rot, and there's nothing anybody can do about it."

"Do you have that trouble?" Dan asked.

"Trouble? Oh, you mean the men

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going to rot." He chuckled softly. "Of course not. The ITC goes to great expense to keep its men contented and happy. No barren barracks for our boys. You'll see for yourselves. Go downstairs and tell that brainless wonder—that Eggerts—that you're at leisure until I send for you. He'll know where to take you." He bounced up and lifted his pudgy hands in a comic benediction, dismissing them. "Go with pleasure, Earthmen. Enjoy the fruits of—of vine and venery—heh-heh, wine and women. You know?"

"Thank you," Dan said.

"Thanks," Hippy echoed tightly.

In the courtyard they found the guard Eggerts with arms folded, thoughtfully contemplating a large green beetle with red eyes which was ambling across the stone paving.

"I didn't think you let any bugs in here," Dan said.

"We don't. That is, we use the chemical spray at regular intervals. The etherine compound, you know. It dries the atmosphere and repels the insects. This one came up through the stones." He produced a plastic spray gun and disposed of the large beetle with an accurate squirt. It curled up instantly and died, losing its brilliant color and turning dull gray like the gray stones.

"What are your instructions?" Eggerts asked, turning to business.

"We're at leisure," Dan said. "For an indefinite period."

Eggerts nodded solemnly. "This way, please."

He led them back to the wall facing the entrance gate, and after they had registered and relinquished their papers, he took them down a dimly lighted hall and turned them over to a Flapper, a huge lead colored native from one of the destroyed asteroids. His peaked, hairless head and one-eyed snout face moved back and forth on man-like shoulders as he welcomed them with monotonous two-toned grunts. His thick arms ended in double flippers that flapped together like clapping hands, and he heaved himself along on a single trunk that served in place of legs, and ended in four slapping flippers.

THEY FOLLOWED the Flapper into an immense salon which had been copied from one of the luxurious pleasure palaces on Earth. A smooth glassite floor was surrounded by curved booths and curtained alcoves, lighted by taper lanterns with red and blue shades which gave the place a dim purple glow. Musky perfume mingled with the thin, dry smoke of huka leaves, and the rich heady aroma of liquors freely poured. The mingled murmur of many voices surged like a muted sea, punctuated now and then by laughter like a tossed wave.

They were placed in a shallow booth midway down the long room, and a small brown Earthman appeared and gazed at them with soft brown eyes. He was one of the leftovers from the tropical isles of Earth. His home had been destroyed in the cataclysmic tidal wave which resulted when the continent of Antarctica was reclaimed. The homeless natives had been transported to Venus because there was no place for them on the thickly populated Earth, and they had found their home again in the sultry Venusian Isles.

He waited for their order, his gentle gaze moving over their faces with the sad appeal of a dog who wants to be friendly, but is never sure of men.

"What's your name?" Dan asked.

"Miko my name." The eyes warmed gratefully.

"All right, Miko. You know more

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about this place than I do. What shall I drink?"

"You want quick-fast bang?"

"No, I don't. I want slow-easy drink."

"What's the matter—you scared of the place?" Hippy rasped.

"I always start out slow and easy. Especially the first time out after a long abstinence. I last so much longer that way."

"Agh!" Hippy grunted. "I don't intend to waste any time. I was invited to indulge, and that's what I'm going to do. If I'm not able to operate for the next three or four work periods, I don't think the Governor is going to scold me. Boy, bring me a bottle of Martian lespe. I'm shooting off on all rockets."

"Lessapee," Miko repeated. "You want?"

"No," Dan said. "Bring me the dry white Earth wine—no, better make it the red, so I can tell the difference between the wine and the lespe."

Miko ducked his head and hurried off.

"My but you're careful," Hippy drawled.

"I guess you know we've stepped into a dirty job," Dan murmured. "But maybe you haven't figured the end of it."

"I'LL DO his jobs, clean or dirty," Hippy said softly. "He's a man who talks my language, and he talks plain."

"He makes you think so, because he's clever enough to say the right things to the right men." Dan kept his voice low, and his eyes watched the room, rather than Hippy. "You must know that if there was any possibility that Messer Klon's agent had done away with the Kvi brothers, his nibs wouldn't need us to prove it. Obviously, we're expected to manufacture the evidence. But if we should fail—if Smith Han fights back and disposes of us—then his nibs has the excuse he wants to claim a treaty violation."

"Let's have it. Once over lightly."

"It will be alleged that two Earthmen, employees of the ITC, were seeking their former employers who were thought to have disappeared when they went to see Smith Han. The Earthmen are killed—in cold blood, of course. With us dead, the case against Smith Han will look very convincing."

Miko came back with a cane basket holding bottles and glasses and a bowl full of krata nuts. He set them up with deft motions, and announced: "Gay girls come."

"No," Dan said. "Not yet. Drink first."

Miko nodded his understanding and took his basket away.

Hippy reached for the tall slim glass of colorless lespe, and set it down again without sipping. His eyes were still and glassy. "Go on," he said softly.

"That's it." Dan tasted his wine and glanced at the bottle approvingly. "That's the gamble, and the house can't lose."

"Don't go shy on me, Storm. We're in this together. There's more to it. What have you got on your mind?"

"You sure you want to know?"

"Dead sure. I've stuck with you all the way, haven't I?"

"I keep wondering why," Dan said bitterly. "It can't be my charming personality or my brilliant judgment. What is the attraction?"

Hippy's glazed stare didn't waver. "I told you what I thought of you back at the labor barracks. With an organization behind you, you could take over these islands—"

"What organization?"

Hippy's eyes blinked and he picked

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up the lespe sipper.

"The Renegades," Dan said softly. "That's why they raided the docks, and later tried to get us on the street. You planned that, but your timing was off. You thought we would be working on the docks. You didn't know we'd have to wait so long before our interview with Cherny. And when they attacked us on the street later, they thought we were on our way to work on the docks. But meanwhile, the big fellow upstairs put in his bid, and you changed your mind about being rescued by the Renegades. So you helped me stand them off until the guard came. You made some dangerous enemies doing that."

THE SLENDER sipper came away from Hippy's flat hard lips, and his nostrils flared as the potent liquor struck swiftly at his senses. His mouth spread in a tight, hard grin. "Maybe," he said. "And maybe I'll make some more before I'm through. Are we going to beat the house on this big bet, or not?"

"You expect me to be frank with you, after what you pulled? What made you think I'd be willing to be kidnapped by the Renegades? Or that I'd be willing to lead a mob like that?"

"You wouldn't have much choice after you were in it," Hippy growled. "You'd see it yourself. A man with your training and knowledge could use a gang of Renegades to take over down here, and make it look right by the time the Government got around to investigating. And besides you need help to fish up that bed of hairweed before somebody else finds it, don't you?"

"So you knew about that? I couldn't be sure. We were on our way back here and everybody thought we had failed. But I let down the drag when I saw what looked like dead hair floating alongside. I thought you were asleep in the cabin when we found it."

"I was. I woke up in time to hear just enough to know what you had found. But I pretended to be asleep when you looked in, and I never did get a chance to check the location. I knew we were sailing for Chela, but I wasn't sure of the route. I was disgusted and not paying much attention. But you didn't tell me about it, so I kept still too. But I didn't intend to let you get away with it."

"I didn't tell you for the simple reason that I couldn't trust you here on Chela. I thought you might sell us out while the Kvi brothers were trying to raise credit. Maybe you did sell us out."

"Because the little red apes disappeared? No, I was waiting. I needed you for the location. But you're worth more than one bed of hairweed, Storm. Why stop with that? There's power and wealth here for the man who's big enough to take it. You figured out the game we got into here. Now figure out how to beat it. I'll back you."

The gray Flapper heaved himself past the booth with three Earthmen in tow. They gave Dan and Hippy the casually careful glances of men trained to observe strangers, but if they had been detailed to watch the Master Mechs, the Flapper was not being very helpful. He conducted them to the far end of the same side of the room, and waved them into a curtained recess from which it would have been difficult to observe or stop them if they left suddenly.

WHEN THE Flapper came back, he stopped and moved his pointed head rapidly from side to side, grunting and blinking his round black eye. Then he turned and

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clapped his flippers loudly, and immediately an assortment of "Gay girls" flocked around them.

The Gay girls were offspring of several generations of their profession. Some were half-breeds of startling beauty, and others were weirdly exotic mixtures of Earth and alien flesh. But all of them had learned the ancient tricks of the profession, the easy smiles and intimate gestures, and the practiced allure of the female animal.

Hippy promptly selected two, a blonde Earth girl with a vacant but very beautiful face, and a plump dark creature with yellow skin and flowing masses of thick black hair. She had short, thick legs and wide hips, and a full bosom suspended in a halter. Dan allowed a billowy siren with slant eyes, a button nose, and steel wool hair parted in intricate horns and curlicues, to slide in beside him. The Flapper clapped the rest of the bevy away, and rolled his head approvingly before humping back to his station.

The siren slid a long arm around Dan's neck, and he said to Hippy: "Your confidence is flattering, but not your method of showing it. From now on I'll call the plays. Understood?"

"Understood," Hippy repeated with flat finality, and turned his attention at once to his two charmers.

They squealed in unison as he pinched them, and in a little while he was lying back with an arm around each while they took turns offering him the lespe sipper and the oily krata nuts.

Wailing flutes and thrumming strings heralded a troup of painted dancing girls, twirling and posturing across the gleaming floor. Dan whispered to his siren, and under cover of the entertainment they slipped away and passed through a curtained exit. . . .

The guard Eggerts was pacing slowly and thoughtfully back and forth across the courtyard when Dan came out.

"I've got to go outside on an errand," Dan said briskly. "Do I need a pass?"

"No pass is required when the men are on leisure," Eggerts recited dutifully. "But you must sign out, give your destination, and indicate when you will return. That is a safety rule so that the guard on gate duty can report any man who is overdue. If the captain deems it necessary, two men are dispatched to bring in the delinquent."

"What's the penalty?"

"That is a matter for the captain to decide." Eggerts' regulation voice changed as he added: "But it doesn't happen often. Our men are glad to get back here, and they usually manage to avoid trouble outside. Hardly anyone wants to start trouble with an ITC man. The Governor is quick to prosecute the slightest disrespect to his men. All you have to do is show your identity tag. They all recognize the ITC insignia."

Dan signed out in the office of the gate guard, and wrote "Government Post" as his destination. If questioned, he intended to say that he had left a valuable obsidian knife there, which he had. It had been confiscated. But his real purpose was to have another talk with Captain Cherny.

WHEN HE stepped out, the gloomy stench smote him like a physical affront. After the clean, chemically dried atmosphere inside the massive building, he could understand why the ITC men did not wander far. He felt the tonic effect of the place himself as he went back toward the

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rickety walk which led to the dreary Government Post. The sick depression had lifted, and all his faculties were alive to a situation which once more held the bright promise of fortune, power and high acclaim.

Hippy Jack was more right than he realized. Large events were shaping up here. Dan Storm recognized the signs. The contest for supremacy was already in progress among the three major forces: Messer Klon, Max Mill, and young Captain Cherny, who was not there by accident.

It was apparent now that Cherny had been specially selected for a dangerous and highly complicated job. The lack of discipline at the labor barracks was due to the fact that Cherny was directing all his attention to the more urgent business. The prompt and efficient action of the guard patrols in suppressing the Renegades was proof of that. Cherny was prepared for trouble and knew where to look for it.

This was the way it always began, with minor incidents which seemed to have no connection with the major forces. In this way incidents were provoked and the discontented were utilized in the master game to divert an opponent. And Dan Storm was grimly dissatisfied with the minor role of diversion which had been assigned to him. He was determined to take a major hand in the game himself.

Max Mill had been clever and very sure of himself. Knowing the kind of man he was dealing with, he had deliberately told them the real purpose of the game in order to inflame their hopes and ambitions. The real stake in the game was nothing less than the empire of the aged Messer Klon. The mysterious ruler of the Southeast Islands could not live forever, and when he died the empire was in danger of being broken up, scattered and wasted in a free-for-all battle to grab a piece of it.

Both the Government and the powerful ITC wanted the rich empire intact. If Max Mill got it, the Government influence in the Islands would be at an end, the ITC would have a monopoly on the rich treasure, and the Government would lose an income of billions of dollars. If the Government got control of the empire, the ITC influence would be diminished to such an extent that the cost of maintaining the expensive ITC post in the Islands would be prohibitive. Max Mill would be forced to retire in defeat, and it might well mean the end of his career.

There remained the mystery of Messer Klon. The ancient potentate was near disintegration. Perhaps he was already gone. Then who, or what, was controlling his empire?

As he left the noisome squalor of the settlement and stepped out along the rickety walk, Dan became aware of a follower. A single Earthman was hurrying now to catch him on the treacherous walk.

AHEAD DAN could see no sign of an ambush. The gray marsh with its lifted cane blades was like an army, forbidding passage. And no living thing could hide on or under the walk without attracting a hungry swarm of insects. Nevertheless the follower came on confidently, which could only mean that he was armed. All metal weapons were useless in the corrosive climate, but the ingenuity of Earthmen had reached back into ancient history and reproduced a variety of deadly tools: stone knives and clubs and darts and spears.

Dan quickened his pace and the crazy walk swayed under the increased force of his long strides. He passed the native huts where yellow Droon babies still clambered like monkeys

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and squawked like crows. The man behind came on at a run, bolder now that his victim was beyond human aid. He was lucky, too. No one approached from the blurred gray mass of Government buildings ahead. Dan broke into a run, and the man fairly hurled himself along the quaking walk and came on him in a final rush that left no doubt of his intention.

Dan's timing was perfect. He stopped dead in his tracks at the mudhole which he remembered, and the surprised attacker collided with his victim who bent under his weight and hurled him headlong into the yawning mudhole and jumped on him.

Dan climbed out of the swarming slime and rot and onto the other side of the broken walk. He left his would-be attacker squirming feebly, and walked swiftly away from the cloud of transparent ghost-flies. He turned in at the headquarters building still brushing at his stinging face and scowling at the fresh mudstains that splattered his uniform. Inside he reported the attack and the disposition of the attacker to the guard on duty, and asked to see Captain Cherny.

He was admitted at once to Cherny's quarters, a bare box of a room with a rope cot, a wooden wardrobe and a small desk and chair. The captain was at his desk, writing a letter by the light of a chemical candle which also served to fumigate and dry the atmosphere. It did not have the cooling effect of the etherine compound, however, and the small room was stuffy and seemed uncomfortably crowded when Dan had entered. Cherny looked at him without surprise and nodded coolly to indicate that he was prepared to listen.

"Sorry if I'm interrupting your paper work," Dan began.

"You are, but it's customary. I do it when I can." Cherny offered no further encouragement, but waited incuriously.

"Our previous interview was unexpectedly brief," Dan said ironically. "I had intended to ask if you could give me any information about the possible whereabouts of the Kvi brothers."

"You are still interested?"

"More so than ever. I now know that they visited the ITC, and possibly Smith Han, in an effort to raise credit. We discovered what we believe to be a rich bed of hairweed, but until I know what happened to the Kvi brothers, I can't legitimately claim the discovery for myself. That's the rule, isn't it?"

"It is, if you insist upon going by the rules," Cherny said without animosity. "If the head of an expedition leaves the Islands and abandons his employees, then the employees have the right to all property and information belonging to that particular expedition. On the other hand, if there is reason to suspect that an employer or expedition leader was murdered, then all the members of the expedition must be cleared of any complicity in the crime before they can claim their rights. You say that you did actually discover a bed of hairweed?"

"I did. Yes."

"What about your fellow employee, Hippy Jack?"

"He seems to have been asleep at the time, and still claims that he has no idea where the discovery is located."

CHERNY LET that go by without comment. He put his fingers on the base of the chemical candle and slid it to the other side of the desk. The steady blue flame bent with the motion and snapped erect again without flickering.

"I can't give you any additional in-

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formation about the Kvi brothers," he said finally. "The only information I have is incidental. That is, it showed up in reports dealing with other matters. I don't know how many establishments they visited, but I do know that they called on Smith Han, the Red Venusian consulate, and the ITC."

"In that order?" Dan asked quickly.

"So it appeared, according to the various reports turned in for that particular work period. Was it your intention to file a complaint and request an investigation?"

"It hasn't come to that yet," Dan said carefully. "I have no reason to suspect murder. When I have—".

A lieutenant knocked and entered. "We've got the mauler," he announced.

"How?" Cherny demanded with sudden interest.

"He brought him," the lieutenant snapped, and flipped a thumb at Dan.

"I neglected to tell you," Dan said. "I was followed here and attacked near that bad mudhole the other side of the Post."

"I see." Cherny relaxed and glanced back at the lieutenant.

"We pulled him out of the mudhole in bad condition," the lieutenant reported. "We washed him off and put him in solitary, but we had to send the medic in. He may have a broken back."

Cherny's gaze moved back to Dan and examined him speculatively. "Did you know who he was?" he asked.

"I still don't know who he is."

"He's a dangerous killer who hires out for big pay. We've been trying to get him for some time. In addition to his other murders, he has killed two of my men who went after him."

"Then I seem to have done you a favor," Dan said without smiling.

"It does seem so," the captain replied. "We've been hauling in a surprising number of Renegades since you left here. The cause and effect are beginning to interest me. Where is Hippy Jack?"

"I left him enjoying the recreational facilities at the ITC post," Dan said shortly.

Cherny nodded. "You're both on leisure time, I take it," he said. "Sorry I can't give you any more information about your former employers. Was there anything else?"

BEFORE DAN could answer, a wild uproar broke out somewhere on the post. Cherny was out of his chair and out of the room instantly, shouting orders for riot weapons. A loud bell clanged and running feet sounded throughout the building as the full guard was alerted. The lieutenant glanced at Dan, and said: "Better sit tight and watch yourself." Then he, too, was gone into the confusion and sound.

Dan stepped out of the room and made his way outside without any opposition. He noted that the arms sergeant was handing out spears and dart throwers to the hastily mustered men. As he came out of the building he glanced toward the labor barracks and saw that the building was being closed to keep the laborers inside. The disturbance had originated at the prison and workhouse, and was still raging in a confused battle.

The two squat, square buildings were located at the rear of the stone-paved yard and gave the attackers some protection, whereas the guards issuing from the barracks had none. Their darts and spears were none too effective, but it was only a matter of time until they had closed in on the Renegades who had arrived in force to effect a jail break. It was a daring attack, and had caught the Govern-

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ment Post completely by surprise, but it could not hope to succeed.

The very senselessness of the attack held Dan's attention, and he stepped down into the yard between two long barracks buildings to observe the fight. It was obvious that the attackers had come in from the rear across the rocky slopes of the volcanic mountain which was the center of Chela Island. They had found a passage where none was suppose to exist, and their attack had been well organized. But still Dan was puzzled. It looked like a hairbrained scheme which was doomed to failure. Until the heavy doors of the prison swung open from inside and a rabble of wild men stormed out.

Dan was suddenly rigid with horror as he saw how they had freed themselves. Weapons had been pushed through the small round portholes which ventilated the building, but not the ordinary weapons which the inner guards might have fought successfully. These madmen, and some of their friends outside, were armed with dainty little plastic spray guns. The kind of useful little household gadget which the guard Eggerts had used back at the ITC building to dispose of a green beetle. Dan recalled now that the gun did not spray insecticide, but squirted a thin hard stream that was instantly effective. Whatever it was, it was effective on men, too. Dan saw a tall guard collapse with a shapeless black blot where his face had been, and other guards were cursing wildly and falling back.

Dan made his way back to the rickety walk, shaken by what he had seen and pressed by a sense of urgency. The lawless Renegades had been loosed with deadly weapons, and matters were moving too fast. The Government forces would be badly crippled by this well planned attack, and their morale would be shaken. And one of the other two major forces would be ready to take advantage of it.

HE HURRIED back to the settlement, and this time he was scarcely aware of the rickety walk, the insects and the stinging acid of his own sweat. He turned into the main roadway and came face to face with Hippy Jack who was hurrying towards him. Their surprise was mutual, and Hippy said dryly: "You certainly know how to bust up a party, friend."

"I didn't think anything short of an earthquake could interfere with your pleasure," Dan retorted. "What induced you to leave?"

"The boy—Miko. He told me you had walked out to get killed. Seems the Governor has his own secret police, and your friend Miko heard the instructions to get you."

"Those three Earthmen who went into the curtained booth," Dan said. "Of course. That led to one of the passages around the pleasure room. There must be peep holes in every booth, and they could stand right behind us. But how did you get out?"

"Same way you did," Hippy said without humor. "I passed through a bed, and signed out right under your fancy scrawl. We were sitting pretty. Why did you have to go and complicate the job? You might have known the Governor wouldn't like it if you rushed right back to Captain Cherny. I suppose you told him all."

"I did not. I went back there to get some information, and I got it. But I still don't understand why you thought you had to rush out after me."

"I told you we were in this together," Hippy said tightly. "I'm smart enough to know I can't handle it alone. If you got yourself knocked

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off, they'd have to finish the job on me, and then maybe dump both corpses in Smith Han's yard. We've both got to be dead to make it look right. Once they went after you, I knew I'd be safer outside—"

"You're not," Dan cut in harshly. "All your Renegade pals just broke jail, and they're armed with those deadly little liquid guns that have been shipped in here under the pretense that they were to be used on insects. Whatever the stuff is, it burns a man down like acid. Somebody armed the Renegades for a purpose, but they can disclaim all responsibility by charging that the Renegades stole a shipment. And meanwhile Cherny's forces have been crippled and disorganized. And now we're both out in the middle with everybody gunning for us."

"You're calling the plays," Hippy reminded him coldly.

"All right. Stand still. Don't turn around. The first thing we've got to do is dispose of these two ITC men who are coming after you." Hippy tensed imperceptibly, and he kept his glassy stare on Dan's face. "They're coming along easy, not as if they were looking for trouble, but they've each got an acid gun on their belt. They'll stop and talk, and try to take us by surprise. We'll have to be fast with our fists."

Hippy laughed suddenly, as if Dan had just told him something very funny. It was a hard, malicious laugh, and there was not the slightest trace of humor on Hippy's tough face as he swung on the man who came up behind him, twisting his body with the lithe savagery of a cat.

DAN THREW a punch that grazed the other man's chin as he stepped back in surprise, reaching for the plastic gun. Dan leaped, and they both crashed into the mud, floundering desperately. Dan got his hands on the man's throat as he tried to lift his head out of the slimy, yielding mud, straining his neck and shoulders. Dan got a grip with his knees and hands, and forced the straining face back and down into the smothering black muck. There was a trampling struggle going on beside them, and then a choked groan and a spattering of mud as another body hit the soft mud. A boot came down on the place where the man's face had been, and Hippy panted: "Get his gun."

Dan pawed down the side of the slimy uniform and jerked the gun-case loose. The man had stopped struggling, and when Dan got up he saw that they were being watched by the usual sluggish crowd, but no one came close, and no guard patrol appeared.

"Come on," Dan growled and walked away shaking the mud off his hands and arms. "We're going to call on Smith Han."

Hippy snorted and spit explosively, cursing the mud. "You think he'll buy some protection?" he rasped. "Now that Max Mill has armed the Renegades and wrecked the Government Post?"

"I want to get to him before the Renegades get back through the hills," Dan said harshly. "I think he's the one who armed them and instigated this trouble. If Max Mill could get those liquid guns, Smith Han could get them, too. But I don't think Max Mill was behind that Renegade attack. He's working along different lines entirely, and he's in no hurry. Whoever is behind that raid on the Government Post is rushing things for some reason which I have to know about."

"You think he'll tell you?" Hippy asked dryly.

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"He will if I rush him a little more." Dan snapped the plastic gun out of its liquid-proof case and examined it. He aimed it at a squirming cluster of white scavenger worms, squirted a thin, hard stream, and the fat white mass shriveled in a small puff of cloudy steam.

"You're not holding back this time," Hippy remarked flatly.

"No. This time it's all or nothing."

They came to the narrow stone building where the affairs of Messer Klon were handled by the cold, cautious Earthman, Smith Han, and Dan banged open the stout wooden door that was almost flush with the street. As if they were anticipated, a small peephole was opened instantly, and a hard bright eye peered at them.

"We've come from the Government Post," Dan growled. "Open up. I've got to report to Smith Han, and I'm in a hurry."

"I'll take your report," a muffled voice said tonelessly.

"No you won't. Open up, or you'll wish you'd been born without eyes."

THE EYE was removed and there was a brief, hasty muttering, in which it was established that there were only two of them. Thick wooden bolts were slammed aside and the door creaked heavily. They were admitted one at a time through a narrow opening and the door was slammed shut. The stocky guard was a dark Earthman with a wiry shock of black hair, a dented nose, and the animal bright eyes of a ruthless killer. The other man confronting them was raw-boned and over six feet tall. He had tight, close eyes, a beak nose and a mouth like a metal clamp.

"Well?" he said coldly. "Speak up."

Dan let him wait, knowing now that he had guessed right. Even his cold severity could not conceal the fact that Smith Han was anxious. He was waiting at the gate himself for the first news of the attack. He was being rushed by circumstances towards a hasty coup, and therefore he was vulnerable, but at the same time doubly dangerous. Dan glanced around the narrow, dark courtyard before answering. It seemed to be deserted, except for the group at the gate.

"I've come to make terms," Dan said arrogantly.

"Terms? What terms? What are you talking about?"

"Did you think the Renegades were dumb enough to do your dirty work, and not expect to be paid off?"

"What did you do?" Smith Han mouthed hoarsely.

"At the Government Post?"

"Yes—blast you!"

"Oh, that. Nothing to it. The entire band of Renegades was released, armed and organized into a solid fighting unit. What did you expect?"

"You got what you wanted!" Smith Han almost shouted.

"I haven't got anything yet," Dan returned coolly. "As for the Renegades, they could break in here and take this place apart."

"You're mad!"

"No, you are. You've loosed the most destructive force in the Islands. And the first thing they did was immobilize the Government protection. If that's what you wanted, you got it. But what's going to prevent the Renegades from turning on you?"

"What is it you want?" Smith Han mouthed tightly.

"That's what I've come to discuss with you," Dan said smoothly.

"Very well. Come inside. The other man can stay here."

"No, he can't," Dan said. "We don't trust anybody, not even each other. He'll come inside, too."

Smith Han twitched his high shoul-

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ders in irritation, turned on his heel and stalked into a narrow doorway. They followed him up a damp stone stairway to a dim upper room. The furniture here was plain serviceable wood, with none of the padded elegance of Max Mill's establishment. They sat on hard chairs and. Smith Han barricaded himself behind a battered desk and eyed them venomously.

"Since you choose to come here and threaten me," he said grimly, "it follows that you want something. What is it?"

"What have you got to offer?" Dan parried.

"To the Renegades?"

"To me. I'm talking for myself at the moment."

"Just the two of you, eh?" Smith Han caressed his chin thoughtfully. "I noticed that you were somewhat superior to the usual riff-raff. I could use a couple of men like you. I could make you a very interesting proposition, if you could prevent or stall off any trouble from the rest of the Renegade gang."

"WE CAN'T guarantee anything," Dan said. "They're armed to the teeth, and wild with success. If they get the idea of raiding this place, there's nothing we can do to stop them."

"But so long as you remain here, there's nothing you can do to start them either, is there?" Smith Han said quickly.

"I'm going to leave you guessing on that one," Dan replied. "Maybe I'm just bluffing. Maybe I don't know anything at all about the Renegades. Maybe I've been hired by Max Mill to get rid of you. As a matter of fact, I'm wearing an ITC identity tag right now." Dan flipped it out and showed it. "On the other hand, the whole gang of Renegades may come here looking for us. Or maybe Max Mill has set a neat trap for you in the hope that you will knock us both off."

"What's that?"

"If you knocked off a couple of ITC employees who came here on legitimate business, Max Mill could accuse you of a treaty violation."

"What legitimate business?"

"There were two little Red Venusians—the Kvi brothers. They discovered a rich bed of hairweed after they ran out of resources, and they came back here to Chela to raise more credit so they could fish up the hairweed. They came here—and they vanished. If a couple of ITC men were sent out to look for them, and they also vanished, it would be a clear case of treaty violation."

Smith Han studied him through narrow eyes. "You seem to be working for everybody," he growled. "I suppose you are also Government Agents."

"No. Captain Cherny declined to avail himself of our services. Personally, I think he made a bad mistake."

"I see. In other words, you are open to the best offer?"

"Why not? It's better to have us with you than against you."

"No doubt," Smith Han declared grimly. "But I wish you had come to me first, instead of last. I might have felt more secure if you hadn't made all these other dubious connections first. And you might have saved me considerable difficulty. However, I can still make you a proposition. An enterprise," he added coldly, "which is worthy of your talents."

"That's why we're here."

"I have on my hands two very important personages. I want you to take them to Messer Klon's island estate and keep them there."

Dan suppressed the questions

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clamoring through his startled mind. This was anything but what he had expected. "That sounds deceptively simple," he said. "Haven't you enough employees to take care of it?"

"Not the right ones. The men who accompany these personages must represent themselves as Government Agents and must, of course, be complete strangers. They must also have the appearance and manners of Government Agents."

"And what will Messer Klon have to say about this?"

"Messer Klon is one of the personages. The other is his only heir."

Dan tensed with surprise, and heard Hippy mutter a curse.

"So that's it," Dan said softly. "The old boy arrived unexpectedly and put you on the spot."

"That's it," Smith admitted coldly. "He has been demanding a conference with the Government representative for some time. When I failed to send Captain Cherny out to him, he took it upon himself to come here. Any conference with Captain Cherny would be contrary to my interests. And, therefore, I am offering you the chance of a lifetime to devote yourselves to my interests."

"I see. We are to impersonate specially appointed Government Agents to keep the old boy satisfied that all is going smoothly with Government approval, which will leave you with a free hand to manipulate the empire to suit your best interests. A very interesting proposition, indeed."

"You can see the magnificent future in it," Smith Han said. "Messer Klon is very old. The grandchild, the heir, is very young and thoroughly inexperienced. If we handle the situation carefully, I shall be able to do business directly with you, and it will be to our mutual interests to work very closely together."

"Yes," Dan agreed sardonically. "Any attempt at double-crossing on our part would wreck the works. You could immediately repudiate us, and prove that we were imposters. Whereas you—"

"As long as you serve me satisfactorily," Smith Han said coldly, "I would have no reason to cross you. But I would certainly protect myself if it became necessary."

"I think..." Dan looked at Hippy, whose glassy stare showed none of the eagerness that was nevertheless apparent in his still tenseness. "I think we'll take him up on the proposition. What do you think?"

"Right," Hippy snapped without hesitation.

SMITH HAN had all the necessary information at his finger tips. He went over it with them swiftly and lucidly, preparing them for their roles as informed Government Agents. They were prepared to accede to the aged potentate's demands, and reassure him about the status of the treaty. And as a special courtesy of the Federated Government, they were to accompany him back to his island estate in order that he might deal directly with the Government through his specially appointed consular service.

It was apparent that the ancient half-man already had reason to mistrust his agent. Hence his insistence on going over the agent's head to deal directly with the Government. Dan Storm could not but admire the devious mind of Smith Han which had seized instantly on their chance appearance to further his scheme.

"I believe we have all the preliminaries clear," Smith Han said at last. "But before I arrange the interview with Messer Klon, you will, of course, wish to remove your arms."

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"Arms?" Dan said. "Oh, you mean this little gadget?" He drew the small squirt gun and held it carelessly aimed toward Smith Han. "Don't you know what this is?"

"Look out, you fool!" Smith Han snarled.

"This is for use on insects," Dan said mildly. "Very useful gadget. My friend has one, too. Show him your insect gun, Hippy."

"Stop it!" Smith Han barked.

"Shut up!" Dan moved closer and leveled the small weapon. "Keep your mouth shut, and take us to Messer Klon."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing. I just don't like you. You're a liar and a thief. And it was no part of your plan to send us off safely with Messer Klon and his defenseless heir. You're much too efficient to fool around with such nonsense. What you have in mind is cold murder. All you needed was somebody to pin the guilt on. A pair of outcasts like us. We'd make ideal murderers, wouldn't we? That's why you were so charmingly frank with us. You thought you had us. But I'm not going to play that way. Get up, you tricky buzzard, and introduce us to Messer Klon."

The big agent cringed in his chair, and Hippy said flatly: "Maybe he's already knocked him off."

"That's what we're going to find out." Dan squirted a thin stream of liquid past the man's rigid, greasy face, and he got up with alacrity, his tight mouth working spasmodically.

"Just take it easy," Dan warned. "And don't try any tricks. Go ahead and introduce us as Government Agents, and let's see what happens."

Smith Han marched stiffly down a narrow dark hall with Dan beside him and Hippy prowling along behind. They turned a corner and entered a small anteroom where a long, green Martian was coiled limply on a divan. He opened pouched eyes and uncurled himself languidly.

"Tell your master," Smith Han said with cold fury, "that two Government agents are here."

The Martian blinked sleepily, turned and glided through an arched doorway.

"Come in—come in," a young voice cried eagerly.

"You first," Dan growled and pushed the rigid agent with his fist.

THEY ENTERED an apartment hung with silvery tissue from ancient Martian looms. Soft thick carpeting muffled their steps, and exotic flowers bloomed in deep jars and vases. On a silken divan was a long slender man with parchment gray skin and a hairless skull which trembled slightly as he fixed his sunken eyes on them. The eyes were pouched Martian eyes, but the hands which lay outside the silken coverlet were five-fingered human hands, withered with age. Beside him stood a slender youth with delicate features wearing an odd turban and a loose coat or jumper over a gray knit uniform.

"You have come at last," an aged voice whispered. "But you are full of antagonism."

"We are full of antagonism for your agent," Dan said quickly. "This man has lied to you and cheated you, Messer Klon. He has kept your presence here a secret. He never intended to allow you to contact the Government representative. And you are in great danger here. Call in your guards, your domestics, whoever you can trust."

"It is true," the old man sighed. "I knew it."

The youth sobbed and fell on his knees beside the divan.

The ancient lifted a trembling arm

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to touch the youth's shoulder and moved on to strike a gong.

Two more languid Martians and three native Droons filed into the room and stood waiting respectfully.

"Is this all?" Dan asked harshly.

"This is all," the old voice quavered. "I brought so few, not wanting to make a great show."

"And now you have fallen into their trap!" Smith Han burst out savagely. "These two are Renegades. They got into the building and forced me to bring them here. And now they know you brought no protection. Can't you see they mean to harm you? They are killers with deadly weapons, and they mean to kill—"

"Shut up!" Dan snapped. "If we do any killing, we'll start with you. What could we gain by killing Messer Klon? Could we step into his shoes, and get away with it? No, but you could, you lying, tricky Earth scum."

Smith Han whirled to dive through the row of retainers and make a dash for the door through which they had come. In the momentary confusion, it was impossible to bring him down with a shot of acid. But Messer Klon shrilled a command, and the two Martians reacted with reptilian grace, flinging long, limber arms that seemed to stretch and recoil with the big, raw-boned agent struggling in a firm grasp.

Hippy Jack stepped lightly across the floor, and Dan said: "Don't—" But Hippy's big fist had already lashed out with deadly suddenness and the crack of hard bone coincided with the limp collapse of the agent's big frame.

THE MARTIANS held him for a moment, and then put him down on the floor and looked at Messer Klon. The aged half-man's pouched eyes were nearly closed and he said nothing at all. But the youth hid his head in the cushions as if he were terrified.

"Close that outer door, Hippy, and lock it," Dan ordered. "We don't want to be interrupted. If Messer Klon and his grandson are frightened, they deserve to be."

"I'm not frightened," the grandson sobbed. "I'm not afraid of you, or that toy gun, or—or anything else you can do!"

"Hush, child," the ancient whispered. "Beta feels badly for me," he explained. "It is humiliating to receive such treatment at the hands of men."

"You have a reputation for wisdom," Dan said. "How is it that you allowed yourself to be tricked into such a dangerous situation?"

"There were certain inevitable matters," Messer Klon said vaguely, "which had to be attended to, even at the risk of humiliation and death."

"It was my fault!" the grandson cried. "Because I needed a—because there had to be a—"

"A mate?" Dan said softly. "Did you think the Federated Government would provide a mate for you?"

The grandson glared through childish tears and Messer Klon murmured: "There were other matters I wished to settle with the Government. Several amendments to the treaty. A long-term extension to protect my heirs. Many things which I have not been able to handle through Smith Han. But who are you, Earthman, and what is your intention?"

"I am another misfit, Messer Klon, like you. Although I have only the red blood of Earth in my veins, still I do not belong in any place that men have made. I cannot live by other men's rules. I must make my own place and my own rules. I have tried many times and failed. This time I will not fail."

"You intend to take my place,"

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Messer Klon said faintly.

Dan looked straight into the wildly staring eyes of the grandson and said: "Yes. I do."

The grandson gasped, and slowly got up, still staring at Dan with wild dark eyes.

"And how do you propose to accomplish this?" Messer Klon inquired calmly.

"With the master key which you will give me," Dan said. "Because I am the man you came here to find. I am the one man who can take over your empire and maintain it as you have done. Because I am like you, and I do not belong any place el. in the Universe."

"You are sure of this?" the old voice asked.

"I am sure. With the master key I can unlock the forces that are in me. The same forces which made you a sovereign master. What is the secret, Messer Klon?" What is the master key?"

"You already have it," the old voice sighed. "When you are sure, you have it. There are no words in any language to tell exactly what it is. I can only tell you what it is like. It is like a strong desire, stronger than anything else, stronger even than you. So strong that it masters you first of all, and hardens your will so that no obstacle is too great. And it is a kind of recognition without surprise, because the hidden parts of your being knew all along what it would be like when you found it."

"Yes," Dan said. "It is like that." He looked at the trance-like stare of the grandson, and repeated: "It is like that."

"We'd better get busy," Hippy said flatly. "The big flitch is coming out of dreamland. And we've still got all his hired hands to deal with. Your fancy language is beyond me, but if you're going to take over like you said, you'll still have to pay some attention to the details."

"Thank you," Dan said gravely. "Now I know why we have become inseparable. We seem to be necessary to each other. Messer Klon, allow me to present my aide, Hippy Jack. He has just reminded me of an unpleasant chore. We are going to have to dispose of the entire personnel of this establishment, and I am afraid it may be a trifle bloody—"

"No—wait!" the grandson cried. "I know what to do. His keys! Get his keys. I know where the wine room is. I'll show you. The men are wild to get in because they haven't been permitted to drink since we've been here. You can lock them in there!"

ONE OF the Martians extended a long arm and gracefully picked the pockets of Smith Han, who groaned and moved his arms jerkily. Dan stepped over and took the carved stone keys from long Martian digits.

"All right," Dan nodded at Beta. "You show me where it is."

They went down the dark deserted hall to a narrow wooden stairway, and Beta pointed out a stout wooden door with a double lock. Dan tried the larger keys, and before he had fitted the right ones, two men had appeared and stood scowling silently. Dan ignored them until he had found the right keys, and swung the door inward. It was unmistakably a wine room, and well stocked. He turned to the scowling observers, and said pleasantly:

"Messer Klon wishes to celebrate an event which he has long anticipated. He has ordered that the employees of his agent's establishment be given free access to the wine room in order to make the celebration complete. How many of you are there?"

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The men looked at each other, scowling suspiciously, and licking their lips. Finally one of them growled: "There's twenty-one altogether. But if Messer Klon said so, you oughta hand out that many bottles. You oughta hand out twenty-one bottles, at least."

"The way I understand it," Dan said carelessly, "you're to help yourselves. But take my advice and don't make too much noise. The door is open."

Furtively the men edged closer, and behind them another man appeared, and then two more. It was not going to be necessary to round them up. They came like rats by ones and twos and crept inside where somebody had lighted a taper. And none came out.

Dan and Beta stood part way up the stairs and watched the shadows flickering and jerking across the stone flags outside the open door. Only muffled noises came from the cavernous room at first, but soon voices were raised as their tongues were loosened. They went at their drinking with a vengeance, voicing their resentment of long enforced restrictions. And suddenly some bright boy got the idea of closing and barring the door from inside.

The door was closed carefully, the bars shot into place, and a roar of triumphant laughter followed. Dan went down the stairs quietly, and under cover of the noise inside, fitted the keys and turned the two locks so that the door was locked both inside and out. When he came back to the stairs, Beta had already gone, fleeing ahead of him like a frightened deer.

He started in pursuit because there was a thing he wanted to say to Beta privately. It was only then he heard the thunderous knocking on the street door.

THERE WAS nothing cautious about this knocking. It had a peremptory, official sound. Nevertheless, instead of going to the courtyard, Dan went back to the office where Smith Han had talked to them. He opened the heavy wooden shutter at the narrow window and saw in the roadway below the combined forces of the Government garrison and the ITC post. Both Captain Cherny and Max Mill were there, and they both looked up as Dan swung the shutter open.

"Ho-ho!" Max Mill laughed. "Look what we have here, Captain. The rascal is here before us. I knew he was going to be troublesome. Didn't I tell you? Didn't I?"

"Where is Smith Han?" Cherny demanded.

Before answering, Dan removed the ITC identity tag and tossed it into the road. "Your attempt to terminate my employment with the ITC was unsuccessful," he told Max Mill chidingly. "However, I got the idea, and I quit working for the ITC on the spot. I am in charge of this establishment at the moment. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"For me? Don't be ridiculous. I am here to back up Captain Cherny in the interests of justice."

"Very commendable," Dan nodded soberly. "Captain Cherny, I assume that you are here to charge Smith Han with certain crimes which violate the treaty. We can settle the entire matter very easily and quickly if you will step inside with no more than four of your men."

"What gives you the right to dictate conditions?" Cherny asked.

"I am acting with the full consent of Messer Klon—"

"The rascal!" Max Mill shouted with laughter. "This is preposterous, Captain. I say we attack—at once."

"You want to gamble with me, Governor?" Dan asked dryly.

"With what?" Max Mill shouted.

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"Tell me that. With what?"

"With my life, since that's the only thing you seem to want from me. You may accompany Captain Cherny inside with four of his men, and if I can't prove to your entire satisfaction that I am acting for Messer Klon with his full consent—and prove it within five minutes—then let your men attack in full force. Unless you and Captain Cherny both appear at this window within five minutes after you enter, and order your men to disperse, they are to break in and kill me at sight. You like that gamble, Governor?"

MAX MILL pushed out his pouting lips in a tight "o" and eyed Captain Cherny shrewdly. "Do you have any idea what he's got, Captain?" he asked.

"Messer Klon has been trying to contact you for some time, Captain," Dan said quietly. "Smith Han did everything he could to prevent him from reaching you. I think it is possible you may have made some attempt to contact Messer Klon through his agent, and failed to do so. If this is true, you will be able to understand that the old potentate was finally forced to take extreme measures to reach you. This is the proof I have."

"What have you got?" Max Mill demanded. "Tell us that."

"Is that the only way you gamble?" Dan asked. "With all the chance taken out of it? You don't mind risking your men on your amusing gambles. Are you afraid to risk your own neck?"

"Ho-ho, you joker!" Max Mill laughed. "Trying to tease me into your trap."

"Then stay out," Dan snapped contemptuously. "Captain, will you come in?"

"Yes," Cherny said quietly. "Sergeant, bring those three men. Lieutenant, hold the line at attention until I give you word."

Dan closed the shutter and went down to open the street door. Somewhat sheepishly, Max Mill followed Captain Cherny into the courtyard. Dan conducted them quickly to the upper apartment, stepped through the arched doorway and noted that Hippy Jack had everything under control.

"Messer Klon," Dan announced, "I have the honor to present Captain Cherny, the official representative of the Federated Government. Before he pays his respects, however, it will be necessary to give instructions to his men outside. Will you excuse this unusual procedure?"

"I will," the ancient said firmly. "Please make whatever dispositions may be necessary. The matter is entirely in your hands."

Cherny bowed in the doorway and turned at once to give the order to his men, glancing at Dan with mingled chagrin and admiration. Max Mill was transfixed with surprise, his comical face screwed into an expression which could only be likened to a man suddenly confronted with a very unpleasant odor. Dan had to urge him toward the front window to second Captain Cherny's orders to disperse.

On the way, Dan explained the hilarious thumpings and bellowing from below, assuring Cherny that Smith Han's entire force was effectively immobilized. When they returned, Dan noted that Smith Han had been picked up off the floor and placed limply in a deep chair. He suspected that Hippy Jack had delivered a second knockout punch to keep him quiet. The big man was obviously sick and dazed.

When the formal presentation was made, Messer Klon greeted Captain Cherny with appropriate diplomatic language, but when he learned the identity of Max Mill, he said simply:

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"I have heard of you."

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Messer Klon," Max Mill said without laughing. "If I had known that you were paying us a visit, I should most certainly have arranged a proper reception."

"No doubt you would have," Messer Klon retorted in a voice like a breeze rustling through dry leaves. "My visit was intended to be confidential, but I am sure that your presence here is unavoidable. Perhaps you have a complaint to make."

"He merely came along to see the fun," Dan explained. "Captain Cherny is here to arrest Smith Han for arming the Renegades with deadly acid guns, and fomenting riots and a jailbreak. Smith Han is guilty, but I hope to convince Captain Cherny that this was done without your knowledge or consent. But first, I should like to ask Captain Cherny if he knows that Max Mill also has a supply of these little plastic guns."

CHERNY nodded and Max Mill broke in before the captain could frame his careful answer: "Aha! That's one of mine, and I know where you got it, you delightful devil." He gurgled gleefully. "I hope you did not think you had acquired a dangerous weapon. That gun is charged with genuine insecticide, it will burn a man but in no way incapacitate him, except perhaps if you strike him squarely in the eyes. I have just had the satisfaction of proving this to Captain Cherny."

"Nevertheless, all of these guns are being confiscated, and shipment will be outlawed," Cherny said, "because of the danger of misuse."

"You may have these two, of course," Dan said. He replaced his gun in its case and stepped across the room to take Hippy's weapon.

Hippy stood beside the chair in which Smith Han was slumped, and he handed over the gun with a hard, impassive face, but he muttered very softly: "Man! If we had tried to kill anybody with this bug juice, we'd be dead meat!"

Smith Han groaned with soft, thick impotence, knowing he had been defeated by his own guilty fear. The very fact that he had been terrified by the sight of an insect gun was proof of his own guilt.

Dan handed the guns to the sergeant, and said: "You can search the place, of course. But I don't think you'll find any of the weapons or the fluid here. Smith Han couldn't trust his own men with anything so dangerous, and he probably didn't want any evidence to be found here. You may find something at the warehouse on the docks. But of course the Renegades are the real danger."

"They are being held in the hills," Cherny said curtly.

"Captain Cherny," Max Mill chuckled, "is a resourceful man. He also has a secret weapon. Can't you tell us what it is, captain, so that we shall be properly impressed by your resourcefulness."

"There is no reason why you shouldn't know," Cherny replied, "now that it has been used. The Renegades were stopped by small gas bombs, which don't kill a man, but make him thoroughly sick and helpless. I don't think we need to have any more fears about the Renegades."

"We are glad to know that," Dan said. "There is one other matter I should like to mention before you begin your private conference with Messer Klon—the Kvi brothers."

"Yes," Cherny said dryly. "In our search of the ITC building, we found them in a private apartment and in fairly good condition. They were en-

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joying the kind of hospitality which has made Max Mill noted—or notorious—as a lavish host."

Dan glanced at Max Mill with a hard grin. "You never do take a real chance, do you, Governor? You always manage to manipulate matters so that other men take all the chances and commit the blunders. The truth is that you were holding the little Red Venusians until they could be disposed of safely, and in such a way that Messer Klon's agent would appear to be guilty of their murder. No one will ever be able to prove this, but you and I know that you don't hesitate at murder. We both know that you sent the mauler out to stop me when I went back to the Government Post to talk to Captain Cherny. But maybe you don't know that I don't kill men as easily as you do. The last I heard the mauler was still alive, and safely confined in the Government prison. Remember that the next time you send an assassin after me. If he fails, and lives to tell about it, your attempted murder may backfire and spoil your fun."

"I knew that you were dangerous enough to liven things up here," Max Mill chuckled softly. "Didn't I tell you so? I knew it. Before I go, I want to make another little bet with you. Let me see—I'll bet you a voting share in the Interplanetary Trade Corporation that you won't last more than one season as Messer Klon's agent."

"You're trying to bet on another sure thing, Governor," Dan replied. "I don't intend to last very long as Messer Klon's agent."

"I knew it!" Max Mill shouted mirthfully. "Watch him, Captain Cherny, he has more tricks up his sleeve. The charming chap! He means to take over the entire territory down here and do us both out of our jobs. My congratulations, Messer Klon. You have acquired a lion, but beware that he doesn't devour you, too. Captain Cherny, if one of your men will let me out of this dingy dungeon, I shall return to the comfort of my notoriously lush establishment. Not that I haven't enjoyed this little outing. It has been both exciting and edifying. My compliments, gentlemen. But do be careful. We are all gamblers, but we can't all win, you know."

He bowed himself out and one of Cherny's guards followed him with a wary scowl and a hand on his club.

"I apologize for his intrusion here, Messer Klon," Dan said. "It was unavoidable, under the circumstances."

"I am glad to have seen him," Messer Klon declared. "The man has a touch of madness. It is that which we shall have to deal with in the future. It is well to know it. And now Captain Cherny, you may arrest my former agent, Smith Han, and after you have disposed of him, perhaps we can have our long delayed conference..."

AS THE little sailing ship approached the Southeast Islands, she seemed to pick up her skirts and skip over the sullen, lead colored sea. The freshening breeze filled her sails and lifted her out of the monotonous gray swells. There was a lightening everywhere. The fog paled to a pearly mist, and as the waves quickened the water itself changed color and became first a dirty tan, then brightened swiftly as their speed increased. They sailed south and east and approached the Isle of Klon in a golden sea and beheld an enormous red sun standing still in a pearl and mauve sky, and turning the water and the lifting island a rosy gold.

Dan and Hippy stood in the bow and watched the mystery island emerge out of the transformed sea.

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"He sure picked himself a spot," Hippy said. "He even has his own private climate down here."

"We're out of the torrid zone here," Dan murmured. "A man could live a lifetime down here and never get tired of it."

"Yeah." Hippy kept his stare fixed on the distant island. "That's what we plan to do, isn't it?"

"Think you can stick it?"

"I told you. I told you more than once. I'm sticking. Anyway, you need me. It won't be all milk and honey. You need me to keep you from going soft. I still don't trust that queer old half-man. I still don't think his mother was Martian."

"You're right. His mother was an Earth woman, and his father was a Martian. It's very unusual, but it can happen that way. The Earth women are universal mothers. You saw some of the results back in Max Mill's pleasure room."

"Now, why didn't I think of that?" Hippy growled. "I might have known.... But what about the grandson? And where does he come in on this deal?"

"Beta has been avoiding me during the whole trip," Dan said, too casually. "But I hope to have an understanding before very long. I doubt if you or anybody else can help me out there, it's—"

Something caused Dan to turn his head, and then he turned completely around and Hippy turned quickly and warily to face the danger. He was still with the surprise of what he saw.

The dark eyed maiden approached them with a kind of shy pride that was both appealing and impressive. Soft brown hair was caught in a youthful fillet of Venusian pearls, and her simple blue robe flowed about a young body that was consciously feminine in every move.

"We are honored, Beta," Dan said gently.

"Beta!" Hippy muttered. "This is the— Oh, I get it." He straightened awkwardly and moved a little away as she came closer.

"This is the first time I have ever seen Hippy Jack surprised," Dan said. "Only a pleasant surprise like you could have done it."

"You mean you didn't tell him?" Beta asked. "But you knew all along. You were never surprised at all."

"YOUR GRANDFATHER Klon called it recognition without surprise. And that's the way it was. Only, of course, he isn't your grandfather."

"No, my grand uncle. My father was his nephew on the Earth side of the family. And when he died I was the only heir left, and I—I wasn't enough. I've never been on Earth. I was born here, and I don't know how to—" Her soft young cheeks turned a deeper rose in the warm sun glow. "I don't know how to ask you to—"

"Beta, you don't have to ask me anything," Dan said gently. "I'll do the asking at the proper time. And this is not the proper time."

"But we have to have children," she cried anxiously.

"We will. You just leave that to me. I think your mother must have died when you were very young, and Grandfather Klon was hardly the right person to educate a young lady with red blood. But I'll try to make up for it. We'll have plenty of time."

"Oh." She looked at the odd expression on Hippy Jack's face, and confided artlessly: "I was so worried about it. But I didn't need to worry at all, did I?"

"No, ma'am," Hippy said flatly. "You don't have to worry about a

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thing. Excuse me, I...I have to see about packing my kit." He moved away, muttering faintly.

"He seemed to be embarrassed," Beta said.

"Not really. He was just being tactful, and leaving us alone."

"Oh. So that you could begin to educate me?"

"No, you impatient little empire builder. So you could begin to educate me with a confidential lecture on the political economy of the Klon empire. Stand right here."

"But you don't have to hold me up!"

"I don't have to, but it's a nice arrangement. Isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. I like it. But I don't want to talk about political economy."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"About you. Grandfather Klon told me your full name is Bodan Storm-Victor, and your family is one of the three greatest Master Forces in the Universe. How did you happen to come here?"

"The answer to that is a family secret. But I will tell you, because I intend to make you a member of the family. According to an ancient Storm-Victor tradition, once every fifty years a son must volunteer to prove that the family strain is as virile as it was in the beginning when the great adventurers wrested their wealth and power from a little known Universe. The son must give up honor, wealth and prestige and go out into the Universe alone to prove he can make his fortune."

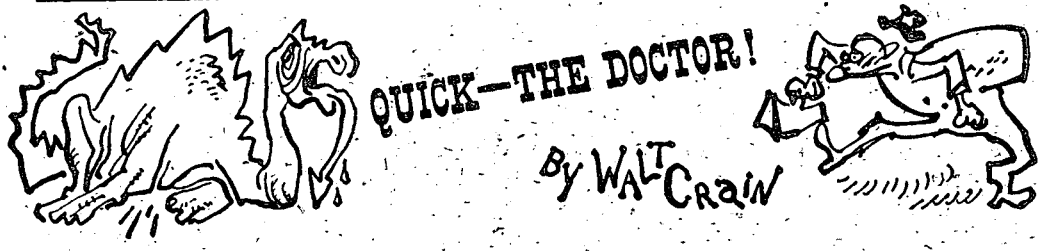
"But that is cruel!"

"And that is what all of our women have cried for generations," Dan laughed. "But how else could we have found the women, and given them sons with a great heritage? Are you sorry I found you?"

"Oh, no. Tell me about the sons."

Dan told her as the saucy little ship glided into the smooth waters of a welcoming bay and native rafts and small boats put out from the pink beach laden with brilliant flowers. The homecoming chant rose and fell in a primitive rhythm, hailing them into a haven for unborn Earthmen, a paradise strangely found at the end of an alien world.

THE END



SO MUCH of the blame for the sickness and disease with which we are afflicted today is laid at the feet of civilization—and the pace of modern living.

But the ancient dinosaurs, the reptiles who lived hundreds of millions of years ago, they too suffered from disease—and many of the same diseases from which we ail.

According to the skeletons which have been unearthed, these huge creatures suffered huge bone abcesses. Undoubtedly, germs had entered wounds and festered there. They also suffered from arthritis. This must have been positive agony—to drag fifteen tons of body about, with the joints aching and creaking—no pills, no needles to deaden the pain.

Osteomyeletis, and even a violent form of cancer—sarcoma—were also offenders, while many of the fossil teeth found are drilled right through with abcess.

No job problems, no marital worries, no brooding or hurt sensibilities were responsible for these. Perhaps we're looking at the picture from the wrong end. It may well be that disease was always there, and that we are more conscious of its existence only now, when we are concerned with the cure—anxious for a wholly healthy world!

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READER'S PAGE

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Dear LES:

Here I am again, writing another letter to you—the second in 8 years of reading FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. This is getting to be a habit. You know, you could look at it as the second in two months. But I found the first relatively painless, so I thought I'd try again. I suppose the lure of getting something of mine into print does have something to do with it.

It is my opinion that there were two really outstanding stories in the December FA: Morrison's THE JOKER and Doar's NO PRICE TOO GREAT. I shall deal in my implacable fashion with the latter first.

While this story of Doar's was a very fine one, the reader should recognize that it is a distortion of life. All fiction reflects life in a changed way. Most of it merely enlarges upon it. Some reflects it in still other ways. One way is a particular form of distortion that enlarges all of Man's faults and follies, and contracts into nothingness all his possibly few, but nevertheless existing, redeeming features.

This form of literary distortion is practiced by Ray Bradbury and the writers who follow his school of science fiction. I do not think "imitators" is a fitting word to apply to these occasionally very talented people. I certainly have nothing against this school of writing. In fact, I think Mr. Bradbury and company have turned out some of the finest stf ever written. My point is that this type of story should *not* be accepted as sheer logic and truth, and that stories of this "degenerate humanity" type should *not* completely dominate stf, because (a) it will eventually scare off new readers, and (b) it is an illogical philosophy that could cause mental disturbance for many people.

It is my belief that Robert A. Heinlein is as great a writer as Ray Bradbury and that, as a steady diet, stories like those Heinlein writes are healthier for science-fiction and human outlook than Bradbury's. Of course, Bradbury writes fine stories and they do something that should constantly be done—remind Man of his humility. But someone should also keep saying a word of encouragement to him.

William Morrison has done an adequate job of that in this issue.

The rest of the stories were the regular Ziff-Davis fare of action and sex. I'm not complaining, mind you. I have often been accused of a serious breech of intelligence but never of being dull enough to regularly buy a magazine I didn't like. Evidently, this is not true of some of your readers. From their published letters, they buy AMAZING and FANTASTIC ADVENTURES with automatic regularity, even though they say they think them the worst magazines published.

Incidentally, Williams' JONGOR FIGHTS BACK! was very good action and sex. It was so unpresumptuous. It obviously meant to do nothing more than entertain. In that, it succeeded. I must admit I liked it, and I would like to read more of Jongor (this story was my first). However, judging from the publication dates from the other Jongor stories, I'll have to wait until about 1954, about in time for that special 15th Anniversary issue of FA you mentioned. Don't forget to start planning for it now.

I must also congratulate you on the artwork in the December FA. The illustrations by Finlay, Lawrence, Sharp, Summers, Woromay (Summers?), and Beecham were all quite good. The only poor illustration in my opinion was the second Jongor one, by Bershad from the contents page. He must be either a very new or a very old artist; he uses such basic fundamentals of drawing and not enough style and interpretation. The work of Summers and his various *noms des plumes*, while not exceptionally good in the sense of Finlay, Lawrence, Cartier, Bok and others, is refreshing due to his individual style.

Jones' cover was very interesting and well done too, although it illustrated the story only by the editorial device of inserting a paragraph about Ann's nightmare. Incidentally, I objected not at all to the girl on the cover, as I never do. I am undoubtedly artistically dull, but I could never find anything degrading about a beautiful woman.

Jim Harmon
427 East 8th Street
Mt. Carmel, Illinois

The first function of fiction—whether science fiction or any other type—is to provide escape from the problems of everyday life.

But, since all fiction is an exaggerated version of situations in life, a story is either hopeful or hopeless, depending upon how the author sees the outcome of a particular basic problem. And as you yourself

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seem to suggest, there are as many variations of good and bad as there are possible points of view in dealing with them as literature.

Our present is compounded of these variations of good and bad. What makes you think that the future will be all sweetness and light, when the future, after all, arises out of the past, which is our present? ..... *Ed.*

PAGING MR. CHARLES FORT

Dear Ed:

Let me congratulate you on another terrific issue. I'm speaking of the November issue of FANTASTIC. It was a great lineup, with "The Man Who Stopped at Nothing" in the lead. The illustrations were excellent, and the "fill-ins" were unusually good. I didn't even mind the advertisements.

I realize you don't print "penned" letters, but I would appreciate your making this an exception.

I live in an out-of-the-way spot, and am unable to secure any back issues of AMAZING and FANTASTIC. If any of your readers would like to sell any old mags, I'm sure we could agree on a satisfactory price.

This means a great deal to me, otherwise I wouldn't ask you to print this.

I've read a lot of stories in your mags, that refer to Charles Fort and similar authors. I was wondering if you could give me a little information on the publishers of said authors. I've inquired at several publishing houses, but had no luck. I hope you can help me.

Thanks!

James O'Brien
Post Office Box 145
Haskell, New Jersey

PRICE LISTS

Dear Sir:

I have been reading AS and FA for about a year and a half and I think they are great. I like stories on time travel, interdimensional travel, and intergalactic wars, and I wish you would print more stories based on those subjects.

I wonder if any of your fans would mind sending me a few back issues of AS and FA. I am just starting a collection of AS and FA and I would appreciate it very much if some of your fans would send me some of their price lists from the year 1940 through 1947.

Byran England
4213 Memphis Street
El Paso, Texas

TOO MUCH IN TOO LITTLE

Dear Ed:

Well, here it is again. I'm another fan making his first stab at a letter. I've been reading FA and AS for five years (as the first letter always says), but I never had the yen to write before. However, how that I'm here, I'd like to give my humble opinion on the December ish, as follows:

THE COVER: It's a good piece of work, but I think he could have picked a better scene to illustrate. It depicts the dream Ann was having while lost in the woods, right? At first glance it reminded me of a dressed-up Lady Godiva. Correction, a half-dressed one. And that brings me to comment on the nudes. What's the matter with them? As at least one fan has said, it's the mind of the bem looking at them that makes them sexy or artistic. Besides, anyone who won't buy a mag because they don't like the pictures should go back to reading comic books. It's a good cover.

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: Great! Keep 'em!

THE EDITORIAL: Seems to me you try to say too much in too little space. Why not kick out those dull articles and expand your column and the readers' section?

THE STORIES: "Deadly Cargo" and "He Knew What He Wanted", being rather dull, are in the "C" class. The rest were all in the "A" class, with "Jongor" getting an "A-Plus". Williams sort of reminded me of Burroughs, the setting, the technique and the characters. Except of course the stf part of it. As far as I know, Tarzan's adventures never concerned anything like Jongor's. This is the first Jongor story I've read, and I liked it very much.

INTERIOR ILLOS: Finlay and Lawrence were tops, the others all good except the one half-way through the Jongor story. That one rates the booby prize. How come Finlay almost always has at least one star in his illos? Is it a trademark?

THE READER'S PAGE: Ah! Here's where I have a disagreement. It's with Joseph Matthews, and incidentally with you, LES. About the movie "The Thing": he says intelligence tends toward peaceful acts and thoughts. I think there are plenty of living examples in our world that prove it ain't necessarily so. I thought the movie was interesting and full of suspence, and most of my friends agree.

I recently saw "The Day the Earth Stood Still", and while I will say I liked it, I think the theme was older than the hills. I (wanting an argument) think "The Thing" was a better movie.

I thought the story Floyd Hilliker told about was interesting and I agreed with his general opinions. Don't know if I should feel insulted by Jan Romanoff or not. I'm eighteen, Jan, am I included in your "cradle trade"? I liked the comment you made on that letter, Ed, and I might add, "So there!!"

Keep the good work coming, and I'll still be buying your mag when I'm on old-age retirement.

Wayne (Van) VanDien
3117 West Highland Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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In our opinion, a successful editorial is one which calls to the reader's attention facts or ideas which the editor has found interesting. And which stimulates the reader to further thinking along those or related lines. Length is not the consideration.

As far as "The Day The Earth Stood Still" is concerned, we believe this is one of Hollywood's best efforts along science-fiction lines. The theme is mature, the plot realistic. It didn't have to depend on the "scare" technique to keep its audience absorbed. ..... Ed.

HIS JOYS...

Dear Ed:

Just read the November issue of *Fantastic Adventures*. "The Man Who Stopped at Nothing", by Paul W. Fairman, is the best story I have read in many a moon, and my wife and I have been reading your magazines for quite a few. How about more by the above author? Really enjoyed that story.

Ethel and Harry Nierling
222 1-2 East Kingston
Charlotte, North Carolina

...ARE HIS SORROWS

Dear Sir:

I am one of those folks who have been reading your *FANTASTIC* and its companion, *AMAZING STORIES*, since "way back when", and I can recall the many fine stories you have published.

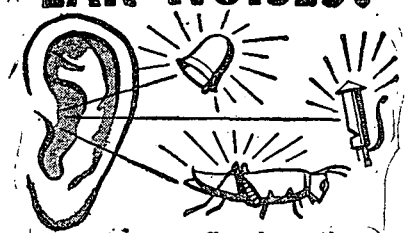
Now, I still like to reread the old stories, which I believe were better than some of the new. I still read the new ones, but I have a problem. OH, what a problem!

Wife says, "Seven boxes of fantasy magazines! Whoever said that fantasy magazines were light reading should have his head examined. Get those things out of here, or else!"

So, here we go.

Now, you fans, if you want to help me hold my wife, please write me. Remember, I have only one issue of any one month or year. Please do not ask me to break a

EAR NOISES?



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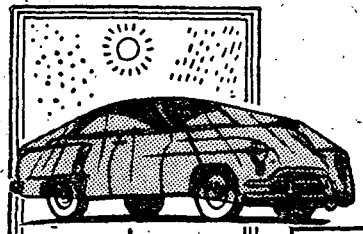

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serial, if one exists. I have *everything* back to 1943, some issues back to 1939. Practically all in printer's condition, good covers. I'm no dealer, just a fellow fan in distress, and what distress!

I'd like to see if anyone besides myself has the collecting itch. I'll sell any or all, C. O. D. postage plus, and oh boy, can we use that extra closet space. Our baby, now five months old, needs even more, so come one, come all.

Write me, *please*. If you live in the vicinity of New York City, phone. I'm listed in the Bronx book, all of two lines.

Best wishes to ye mag and to all the fans.

Milton C. Erland
3900 Spuyten Duyvil Parkway
New York 71, New York

MINUS NINE YEARS!

Dear Editor:

Just finished your December issue. "Jongor Fights Back", by Williams, was one of the best stories I have ever read. "Never Shoot a Stranger", by Creighton, was exceptional. The other stories in this issue were all good. I would rate them nearly equal, so will attempt no numerical order.

I have a request to make. From 1940 through 1945 I was in the army. From 1945 through 1949 I was studying engineering under the G. I. Bill. During this period I missed out on science fiction completely.

Now, I would like to catch up on my favorite literature, and would appreciate hearing from anyone who has a collection to sell or wants to clear out his attic. If you have one copy or one hundred—let me know, I would appreciate it.

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James R. Harris
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.....*Ed.*

HE CAN'T SEE THE CONNECTION....

Dear Editor:

What connection was there between the lead novel and the cover of your last ish of FANTASTIC (December, that is)? I notice that the interior illos are improving—now how about the exterior? Need I say more?

Here, in my opinion, is the rating of the December stories. In this issue I was surprised to find that neither of the novels was anything to brag about. In fact, the only two good stories in the issue were "Deadly Cargo" and "The Joker". The other two shorts were hardly worth mentioning, but I will say that "He Knew What He Wanted" wasn't in last place.

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Now for a little more constructive criticism. You need longer novels, fewer articles, and more stories by Miller, Fairman, and Jorgensen.

Since this is just my second letter, I won't go overboard with this "criticism" business, but I do think that some attempt at the above would result in a better mag, which is, of course, just my opinion.

One more thing: why do you print those letters with such unreasonable criticism, such as a certain Dr. Carpenter, whose letter appeared some time ago on the Reader's Page??? It certainly doesn't help your publicity any. Could it be that you just want to prove how *Fantastically* unreasonable some people can be?

Lewis Bun
303 West Park
Pittsburg, Kansas

Could be. .....Ed.

WE TAKE DARES TOO

Dear Ed:

This is my second letter to your mag. My first appeared in the September 1951 *ish* and I was pleased at seeing it in black and white. However, I don't believe you'll print this one. You see, in my first letter I praised the lead story you ran and its young author ("Whom the Gods Would Slay", Ivar Jorgensen), but I am sorry to say that this time I have different views.

In your December *ish* the short stories and novelette were ranging in quality from good to excellent, and up to the time I turned to the novel for the month I was very pleased. I read the first few pages of "Jongor Fights Back" by Robert Moore Williams with interest. Then, suddenly, it dawned on me that I had read something very similar to it somewhere before. I finally realized the truth.

It might be coincidence, but it just so happens that Tarzan, the famous Edgar Rice Burroughs character, was orphaned in the terrible jungle after his parents were stranded there. The boy also became a black-haired, mighty-muscled jungle lord. Another odd coincidence is that Tarzan finds the degenerate race of Opar, descendents of a mining colony sent from the lost continent of Atlantis. These people have also descended to the level of apes. Strange, isn't it, that Jongor finds a lost race of descendents of a mining colony sent from the long-dead nation of Mu, on the level of apes?

Again I say, I could be wrong, and these facts are just amazing coincidences.

By the way, in case you are curious to know where I got my info, you can find my facts in "Tarzan of the Apes" and "The Return of Tarzan", both copyrighted between 1914 and 1915.

Until next *ish*, this is,

Mel Chase
1119 Foster Avenue
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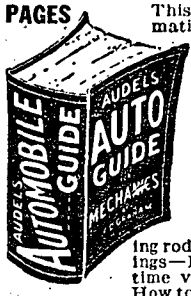

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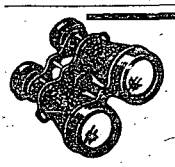

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Besides Jongor and Tarzan, there have been many stories written which incorporate such plot twists as you have described. These are dramatic and exciting situations, and consciously or unconsciously authors will use variations on them until the end of time.....Ed.

A THREE-WOW LETTER

Dear Ed:

I see I got my letter printed, first time, too. Since then I have matured from a small-time collector of 15, to an average-time collector of 115 magazines. Since then I have read many of the books which are well noted.

(1) "Eye of the World"
(2) "Invasion of the Plant Men"
(3) "Involuntary Immortals"
(4) "Giants of Mogo"
(5) "Flight of the Starling"

And now you see why I think I am an experienced reader. I thought the November issue was wonderful.

(1) "The Man Who Stopped at Nothing", Paul W. Fairman. Excellent.
(2) "Remember Not to Die", Roger Phillips. Good.
(3) "Mission Accomplished", Wallace Umphrey. Good.
(4) "Anything Your Heart Desires", Stephen Marlowe. Fair.
(5) "Girl in the Golden Wig", Chester Geier. Well...
(6) "He Knew All the Answers", Dallas Ross. Oh no!

But the cover! Wow! It was better than anything in '51 except "Empire of Evil".

Then that December issue—Wow, Wow, and triple Wow.

(1) "Jongor Fights Back", Robert Moore Williams. Excellent.
(2) "Never Shoot a Stranger", Charles Creighton. Just 1% behind.
(3) "The Joker", William Morrison. Good.
(4) "No Price Too Great", Graham Doar. Fair.
(5) "He Knew What He Wanted", E. K. Jarvis. Fair.
(6) "Deadly Cargo", Paul Fairman. All right.

Kent Corey
Post Office Box 64
Enid, Oklahoma

WHO WANTS TO ARGUE?

Dear Ed:

After reading FA and AS for nearly five years and being a subscriber for the past year, I think it's about time I added my opinions.

Now, to go back a few years, here in my opinion are the most memorable stories (novels and shorts):

(1) "The Dreaming Jewels" by Ted Sturgeon—a masterpiece.
(2) "The Robot Men of Bubble City"

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by Rog Phillips—terrific.

(3) "All Else is Dust"—E. K. Jaryis—unusual.

(4) "Window to the Future" and "Null F" by Peter Worth—odd.

(5) "The Masters of Sleep" by L. Ron Hubbard—excellent.

(6) "Lorelei Street" by Craig Browning—unique.

(7) "The Shades of Toffee" by Chas. F. Myers—funny.

(8) "Girl from Mars" by Robert Bloch—gads!

(9) "Five Years in the Marmalade" by Geoff St. Reynard—wonderful!

(10) "The Involuntary Immortals"—sorry! I've run out of adjectives!

If anyone disagrees with my choices, I would gladly argue my point.

As for your illustrations, Finlay is tops! I don't mean to create unemployment, but he's all you need. Also, how about some more stories by such writers as Sturgeon, Long, Hubbard, Browne, Phillips, Del Rey and Peter Worth.

By the way "Tales of Tomorrow" is no longer the only SF program on TV. On Sundays at 6 there is a new SF series called "Out There". I viewed its first production and it appeared to be well cast. The story was "The Outer Limit" by Graham Doar (one of your boys!)

As far as ranking FA and AS with other SF and SFan mags goes, it's simple. There is only one other mag that I enjoy as much or even more at times (a fairly new one at 35c, and well worth it), *Imagination*. With Hamling as Ed. and some of our former writers, and such covers as November of this year, how could it miss. Trailing your mag next comes SS, *Planet Stories* and TWS, respectively. Well, I guess this letter takes care of the last five years. You can expect to hear from me again in 1956.

I agree with Mott (December 1951 issue) as to the stories I'd like to see, but doesn't AS cover all that? How about just some pure, unadulterated ridiculous fantasy in FA?

If any fan is interested in buying some back issues of FA and AS back to '48, or some *Astoundings*, *Planets*, *SSs*, *Futures*, etc., they're for sale. About 250 in all.

Jay N. Edelson, U.S.N.R.
1475 Grand Concourse
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Most of our writers have already written stf for TV adaptation.

And we're looking forward to hearing from you again, before the next five years. .....Ed.

COME BACK—ALL IS FORGIVEN

Dear Editor:

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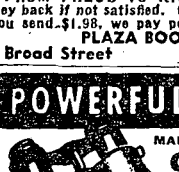

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yet, I am emboldened to attack FA too. Here I is.

"Jongor Fights Back". Not so bad. Maybe I would have liked it better if I had read the other Jongor tales. I'll have to look them up.

"No Price Too Great". So sad, so fruitless. I like my stories to get somewhere. I know the earth is doomed. Isn't that what each generation is coming to"? But tell Graham Doar not to despair. All is forgiven and he can come back home, because I saw a production of his about flying saucers on the new television science-fiction story program "Out There" on CBS recently, and he saved us all very satisfactorily. Good boy!

"He Knew What He Wanted"; "Deadly Cargo"; "The Joker"; "Never Shoot a Stranger": I liked these stories in that order.

Very nice cover this time.

Mrs. Francis Huber
20 Stanley Street
Irvington, New Jersey

TRADE MART

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the December issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES and enjoyed it very much. The stories are all good and well written.

I've read AMAZING for a long time but this is my first try at FANTASTIC, and I sincerely wish it many, many years of success.

The "Reader's Page" is a source of real enjoyment for me, and I notice some of your readers mention "Masters of Sleep" by L. Ron Hubbard. I wonder if anyone could lend me a copy of "Slaves of Sleep", by the same author? I'd be glad to exchange old copies of science-fiction magazines with anyone and would be happy to receive any old copies that anyone cares to send me.

Please give us a feature-length story by A. Merritt in the near future.

Wishing you continued success,

Wiley A. Gribble
Box 272
Chickamauga, Georgia

By Omar Booth

WITH THE advent of television, and the increasing fanaticism with which the American audience has taken to it, cartoonists have been having a wild time caricaturing the man of the future—after eons of watching TV: tremendous eyes and ears; pursed, shrunken mouth from whispering "shhhh" during the program; completely undeveloped legs; and overdeveloped

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arms from reaching for the popcorn on the coffee table.

Actually, though, man will develop his senses in the centuries to come more than he will anything else. Or, rather, his recognition of his senses. For example, right today, most of us never notice *how* we notice. We get a general impression, and then think we are acting on what we have learned from that impression. We completely confuse the identity of the sense which gave us the knowledge, oftentimes crediting the sense of smell for what the sense of sight tells us, the sense of sound for what the sense of touch teaches us, and so on.

If it's a very strong scent, your eyes see more clearly during the instant of smell. The shock down the olfactory nerve spurs the sight nerves. So the awareness you think you have gained from smell, you probably have first picked up from sight.

Too, we automatically assume that others see the world as we do. This is incorrect. People see best what interests them most. Sure, the bookkeeper can learn to track and note as well as the man whose business it is to hunt. But he'll miss a lot of things in his tracking.

It goes even further than this. Many of the savage tribes, for example, have no word for the color blue. In fact, they don't seem even to notice all the various shadings of the blues we see. But reds, which is in their definite sphere—this color they notice in shades which we completely overlook.

THINK WITH YOUR HIPS

By Jon Barry

OF THE GIGANTIC reptiles that roamed over the face of the earth millions of years ago, there were some the size of a battleship which yet had brains no larger than a cocktail onion.

But the oddest of these huge lizards was one which had three brains! In the skull—between the shoulders—and between the hips.

There are interesting theories involving the reflexes of these animals. Some anthropologists maintain that the gigantic saurians were so slow on the uptake that you could strike them and be able to get safely away from their area before they even realized they'd been hit.

But this is probably pure speculation. Maybe if this three-brained creature were hurt on the tail, it could shoot up from the hip and knock out its aggressor—while its other two brains went on about their business quietly. Just as the window being locked in the basement of a house would have no effect on the open window in the attic.

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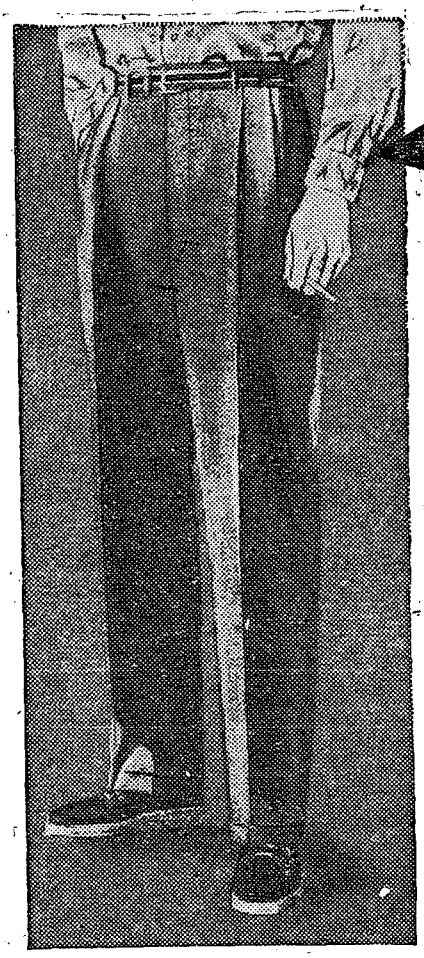

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Each week . . . 10,000 pairs of super-luxurious slacks are produced by our factory . . . and each is top quality. All Gold Cup slacks are styled in famous Hollywood Model, complete with pleats and zippers. Perfect for dress, work and leisure wear. (Good all-year-round weight, too!) Saddle stitched for that smart style look . . . Complete with watch pocket and tabs on back pocket . . . And other features found in slacks selling for $25 and more.

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EASY TO ORDER

Gold Cup Slacks are manufactured in waist sizes from 29 inches to 42 inches. Will fit any man who wears regular size clothes. Just send us your waist measurement and the colors you desire.

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Gentlemen: I am enclosing $5.95 for each pair of Gold Cup Slacks ordered.

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$15.20 an hour!

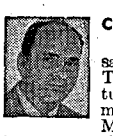
This is the average earning reported by Presto salesman WILLIAM F. WYDALLIS. "The sky's the limit" on Presto profits because of America's serious need for this new fire extinguishing discovery.

WILLIAM F. WYDALLIS

"Most specialty salesmen are always on the lookout for a 'natural.' The 'natural' of this decade is the PRESTO FIRE EXTINGUISHER . . . because it is handy in size, simple to operate, and in the right price range.

"For every hour I have devoted to the Presto, I find that I have earned an average of $15.20 an hour. I am now convinced that extraordinary money can be made in this safety field. I am devoting more of my time to this product now since I have discovered that the earnings on this item are greater than any item I have handled in the past."

—William F. Wydallis
Van Wert, Ohio



CHARLES KAMA

This Presto salesman from Texas was featured as "Salesman of the Month" on the front cover of a sales magazine. He told the magazine's reporter:

"I think I've succeeded pretty well. I'm making more than a thousand dollars a month—and I haven't touched bottom yet."

WOULDN'T YOU like to be making the kind of money William F. Wydallis is making? His story (printed at right) is just one example of the brilliant success that Presto salesmen are meeting everywhere! A Florida salesman earned $600 in one month. An Ohio man earned $2100 in 2 months. A New York salesman earned $1500 in one month. A New Hampshire salesman added the Presto as a sideline and picked up an extra $1800 in 20 months.

What Is the Secret?

PRESTO contains an amazing new chemical—"Chlorobromomethane" or "C.B." developed as a secret defense against fire during the war.

In comparing effectiveness of "C.B." in fighting various kinds of fires an authoritative testing laboratory report states: "It has been proved that *'C.B.' is about 1.5 to 6 times as effective as other common extinguishing agents on an equal weight basis.*"

This extra effectiveness of "C.B." means that Presto can be made light and handy enough for even a woman or child to use. Just a twist of the knob . . . and flames disappear! "Sells on sight" to Civil defense workers, owners of homes, cars, stores, farms, service stations, boats, motorcycles, factories, offices.

Why Large Presto Profits Are So Easy

Everyone is terrified at the very *thought* of *FIRE! Every year* fire kills more than 11,000 people. Over half women and children! Civilian Defense authorities have said that in the event of atomic attack regular fire fighting forces will be fighting large fires and that the people must be equipped to take care instantly of the little fire that might so easily become a big one. Most people who see Presto in action want one or more—ESPECIALLY WHEN THE PRICE IS ONLY $3.98 EACH!

You can demonstrate Presto in a few minutes, and every sale will net you $1 or more. We re-fill your Demonstrator free and give you dramatically powerful printed sales material to "talk from" . . . free certificates testifying that Presto is GUARANTEED FOR 20 YEARS.

YOU DON'T NEED TO INVEST A PENNY. Just collect and *keep* $1 or more every time you write an order—we collect the balance and deliver the extinguisher. (Or if you *wish*, you can buy from us at extra-low wholesale prices and then make up to $2.18 profit per unit supplying both dealers and retail customers—we'll send you free details.)

Only Presto Has All These Features

- Ends Fire as Fast as 2 Seconds
- Chemical Contents 1.5 to 6 Times More Effective than Others on an Equal Weight Basis
- Weighs Less Than 1 lb.
- Easily Held in One Hand—Even by a Child
- Needs No Inspection or Re-Charging—Does Not Corrode or Deteriorate
- Costs Only $3.98—Yet Outperforms Bulky Extinguishers Costing Several Times as Much
- Automatic Pressure—No Pumping
- Guaranteed for 20 Years—Certificate Is Packed with Every Presto

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